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“ ‘Lord, thou hast bidden me throw myself from this tower ’ ” (*see page 363*).

JOAN *of the* TOWER

BY

WARWICK DEEPING

Author of "The Lame Englishman," "The
Rust of Rome," "The Red Saint,"
"Uther and Igraine," etc.

With a Frontispiece by
A. C. MICHAEL

ROBERTA SARAH TAYFORD
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1911



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Joan of the Tower

I

Sunset over the Great Wold

THE call was for Brother Pelleas, but Brother Pelleas did not hear.

He had rested the head of his axe on the trunk of the oak that he had felled, and was leaning both hands on the axe handle, his head bowed down as though in thought.

“Brother Pelleas.”

A lean monk, whose bare forearms were black with hair, put his hands to his mouth and bellowed; and Brother Pelleas's face rose suddenly into the sunlight, the white and shining face of a young man, a broad face with straight brows parted by three deep wrinkles, and a mouth whose lips closed on one another in a grim, truth-telling line. Brother Pelleas had the look of a man who had thrown a daily defiance at the Devil. A sparkle of light in the blue eyes saved the face from harshness, and at times that uncompromising mouth was as tender as the mouth of a woman.

Joan of the Tower

"Brother, come and fetch this oak stub out of its hole."

Pelleas left his axe against the tree, and crossed to where five of the White Monks of Roding were gathered round the pit that held the stub of a young oak. They were clearing a piece of woodland that spring to add to the arable land of the abbey, stripping the bark from the oaks to sell to the tanner, and stacking the timber in the abbey yard. Fifty paces away a few of the lay brethren and a dozen of the abbey villeins were loading wood on to a rough timber tug that was drawn by a dozen oxen. The oak bark, the faggots cut from the underwood, and the smaller stuff from the trees were piled separately into neat stacks. A film of green covered the uncut brushwood. The yellow tassels of the hazel had dusted their pollen over the red spikes. As for the white windflowers, they were falling asleep. Primroses looked out from under the hazel stubs, and the first blue clouding of the wild hyacinths made the gloom of the woods rich and strange.

Brother Pelleas had his white habit turned to his knees and the sleeves rolled to the shoulders. The muscles and sinews stood out under the skin. When great strength was needed, the Abbey called for this rugged-faced young man whose big brown hands made tough jobs seem so easy.

"The devil's in that oak stub," said the lean monk with the hairy forearms. "We have been grubbing at it an hour."

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He stooped and peered into the pit, shading his ill-tempered, hawk's profile with a soil-stained hand.

"All the roots seem cut, but he won't budge."

Pelleas looked at the oak stub with that steady, level-eyed silence of his that seemed part of his great strength.

"Give me an ash pole."

They found him a pole some twelve feet long, two of them handling it as though it were very heavy. In Pelleas's hands the ash pole twisted and swung like a pilgrim's staff. He thrust one end of it under the oak stub, laid an oak bough at the edge of the pit for leverage, and put his weight upon the pole. A bottom root spat and cracked as the oak stub stirred in its bed. Darkness showed under the hacked carcass. Pelleas called two of the brethren to hold the pole. He climbed down into the pit, and took the oak stub by the roots as a giant might take a stubborn bull by the horns. His arms grew knotty from shoulder to wrist as he lifted the stub slowly and rolled it over the edge of the pit.

The monk with the cruel nostrils and the hairy forearms looked at him grudgingly.

"God is not proud of the strength of a man's legs," he said.

And Pelleas, who knew the man's austere conceit, beat the soil from his hands, and smiled.

The ringing of the great bell of Roding came up out of the valley with a resonant sadness that marred

the singing of the birds. Brother Pelleas had shouldered his axe, and the three deep furrows between his brows seemed to grow yet deeper. It was as though the clapper of the abbey bell had struck from his heart notes of doubt and discontent and pain. At times that big bell had the voice of a bully, and there was a gloating insolence in the boom from its great throat.

Pelleas left the rest of the White Brothers to gather up their tools, and went out of the wood by a path that ran along the ridge of a hill. The sun stood low in the sky, and the whole west was full of golden mist. Eastwards lay the valley of Roding, sunk deep in the shadows, and quivering with the beat of the abbey bell. The sunlight had left the tops of the Roding trees. Its fish-ponds were black and melancholy eyes staring at the zenith. The gilded vane on the great bell tower was the one thing that glimmered in the evening light.

Brother Pelleas turned his face this way and that as he walked, first toward that valley of shadows, then toward the open west that smoked with golden vapour. The contrasts between the two stayed many of the emotions that had been working in his heart. He loitered under the beech trees on the hill, looking out between their smooth black boles at a stretch of country that fled toward the sunset. Before him lay the Great Wold, that wilderness of forest, moor, and marsh, wild as the sea at night, strange and mysterious as a dead city under the

moon. Dim hills rose against the yellow sky; valleys lost themselves in shining mist; sometimes the eye caught the flash of water, or the purple sweep of an open moor. Pelleas stood there drawing deep breaths, his eyes shining against the setting sun.

What though a dying man had given his child to the Cistercians of Roding, the child monk and the grown man were very different creatures. The child had taken his discipline, his schooling, and his vows as matters that were as inevitable as the coming of the seasons in that forest valley. From the outer world the boy had brought few memories, memories whose tragic ugliness had made them vague and incomprehensible to the child.

There comes a time when a young man begins to ask himself questions. Pelleas had asked them, even in the thick of his trappings upon the fierceness of his young flesh.

He had the silence of great strength that pushes slowly along its solitary path.

Then it happened that old Brother Remigius, who kept the abbey books, had let the viper of a French romance coil itself in Pelleas's bosom. That book had bitten Pelleas to the heart. He had read of strange happenings, of swords and spears, of great deeds, of women succoured, and of wrongs righted. Knights went riding athwart the sunset, and he had caught the gleam of a woman's hair. A voice seemed to sing to him out of that great green

outer world. He listened to it, though he had been taught to call it the voice of the Devil.

Pelleas had scourged himself, and knelt on the stones all night. The lad was a reticent lad, and as his man's strength grew in him, he spoke less and less to those who should have chastened him.

The voice of the great world called, and the book lay in his bosom. The man who felled oak trees desired to carry a sword. The life yonder came in the light of a vision, a vision of youth riding to find adventures, to do great deeds, to succour the wronged, to keep itself pure and valiant. There was red blood under the white habit, a discontent that was generous, desire that had no carnal impulses.

Passing the meadows that evening Pelleas saw Douce in her red cloak crossing the footbridge over the brook. The girl brought in clean linen in her basket from her mother's below the mill. Pelleas had passed the girl not six times in as many months, but each passing had brought him a strange heaviness at the heart. He might not look at her, and Douce, with her black hair and her sunburnt face, had never lifted her eyes to look at him. Two worlds touched timidly for the moment in the meeting of the young man and the girl with her basket of linen. The flicker of Douce's red cloak was like a gleam of colour leaping on him from the lines of that lurking book.

Pelleas kept his eyes from the girl as he crossed the meadows, but the glimpse of her red cloak had

flown like a spark to the tinder of his desires. He had been taught that a monk should accept all the ordinances and ask no questions, clasping an austere docility like a girdle about his loins. Pelleas had discovered the man in himself rather than the monk. He doubted the value of the vows of a child, even the value of this life at Roding with its grim silences, its grey and half-starved sanctity, its labour in the fields. What a saving of souls for strong and determined men! If the world were so perilous, surely it were more manly to go out and conquer the world than to hide from it like a girl who bars the door of her room. "What if Christ and the Apostles had shut themselves up in stone cells?" Pelleas threw that challenge into the balance of his discontent. He was an honest rebel; strong with all the terrible sincerity of youth; not to be cowed by words and phrases. That evening he had come to the edge of his decision, and the flare of the sunset over the Great Wold had been a banner flapping across the sky.

At Vespers he stood in the great bare church, a dim white figure amid dim white figures, murmuring Ambrosian chants that rose emptily towards the roof. The aisles were half in darkness, and a few tapers blinked in the choir. Never had the place seemed more of a death vault, with its forlorn echoes, and the rigid silence of its stones. The patter of sandalled feet went down through the dusk, white ghosts moving two by two, strange

bloodless men, who starved themselves, and laboured and prayed. Pelleas felt that he walked among the dead. The silence of that last meal in the refectory was the silence of meditation before a journey into unknown lands. Pelleas drank his bowl of broth, but put his bread into his bosom to serve him on the morrow.

Brother Pelleas spent the night in prayer, kneeling on the stone floor of his cell. A great tranquillity encompassed him, and he was not ashamed of the new life that he had chosen. Many weaker men had beaten their souls to bloodless pulp against the stones of the monkish prison house. But Pelleas was knottier in heart and body. There was no rushing toward the flesh-pots in this pilgrimage of his. He was going to carry the vows out into the adventurous world. He would challenge the Devil in his own strong places, play the part of God's knight, right wrongs, slay dragons, keep himself clean and pure. As for women, he would have no knowledge of them, save that they might be weak creatures who would need succouring. Instead of smiting oaks, he would smite the evil that crawled up out of the marshy places to feed upon the bodies of men.

II

Pelleas goes out into the World

PELLEAS was out before dawn, brushing the dew from the meadow grass, and following the misty twilight track of the brook that ran towards the abbey mill. The great wheel was silent when he came to the bridge, though he heard the roar of the sluices. The sky became vaguely blue beyond the grey mist of the morning, and not a breath stirred in the willows along the banks of the brook.

Pelleas held on over the meadows toward the brown heights of towering beech woods. He carried an axe and a bill-hook with him, for there was a fence to be mended out yonder, and the excuse served his plan. Coming to a thicket of young oaks, he cut himself a stout staff and trimmed it with his bill-hook. The purpling brown of the beech-hangers marked the track of the river Lemmel, and Pelleas soon saw it sliding under the shade of the beeches, sleek, black water without a ripple or a swirl, deep in mid-stream, and still smothered in the mist of the morning. This river shut off the lands of Roding, and beyond the beech-hangers the Great Wold began.

Now Pelleas took matters in a symbolical sense

that morning. He had made his plans with the thoroughness of a young man in earnest, and since he was casting off the habits of a monk, he saw a fitness in casting off the clothes also. First he ate the bread saved from last night's supper, and then knelt down and prayed awhile before he stripped off his white habit and lamb's wool tunic, folding them neatly, and laying them on the axe and bill-hook. In his quaint thoroughness he was determined to go naked out of the Roding lands, keeping nothing but his oak staff, a linen cloth about his loins, and a sheepskin cap to hide his tonsure. It was this same tonsure that troubled Pelleas's ingenuity not a little, promising him all manner of shifts and deceits till the hair should grow. He had brought a strip of leather with him, and out of this strip he made a fillet to bind his cap down over his brows.

When he had put up a second prayer, Pelleas took his staff and sprang down into the river. The still water crackled and splurged under him as he struck out for the further bank, swimming flank-wise, and trailing the staff after him with one hand. Twenty strokes, and his feet touched slime and the bottom of rotting leaves. Bubbles of gas rose and burst under his chin. Pelleas stood waist-deep in the river, crossed himself, and looked at the rising sun. He dashed up water over his face and head, as though cleansing himself of his old promises, climbed the bank, and stood on the edge of a world unknown.

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Pelleas's breaking of the bounds timed itself with the dawn, and the sun striking up over the edge of the Great Wold, shone upon a naked man striding like a young Hercules with a club upon his shoulder.

The Lemmel water still glistened on Pelleas's limbs. He looked part of the dawn, with the dew thereof upon him, and the strength of an oak tree in his body.

But Pelleas was not cursed with self-consciousness, save in so far as his first quest was to be the quest of clothes. It did not strike him that he was an effective part of the landscape; that the notable spirit of adventure marched with him; that he was a magnificent animal, and far more comely than the buck or the boar. His strenuous simplicity ran like a torrent into the wealth of the wild. The song of the birds went throbbing through the woodlands, and the young man's heart rejoiced and was glad.

Pelleas travelled five leagues that day, without meeting with any adventure that promised to provide him with clothes. The Great Wold offered him mystery and splendour, but neither food nor a new cloak. He tramped over the brown mast of the pine woods, with the green tops sailing sky high, and the dead stumps of branches on the straight trunks making the distance a black net. Between these darker aisles were waves of moorland still yellow with gorse. Forest land rose everywhere in purple steeps against the blue. There was a west

wind blowing, and white chariot clouds rolling over the world, their shadows making moments of sadness and of joy. Now and again Pelleas saw a rush of tawny colour among the trees as deer started up, and trotted away into the deeps. The Great Wold was strangely silent, yet strangely alive. Cuckoos called, east and west, across valleys, from the tops of hills. The cuckoo's mate made its shy and plaintive chiding. Pelleas saw a snake coiled on a warm bank, and heard a green woodpecker laughing at him.

"Laugh, my friend," he said, with the ingenuous sententiousness of man tagging a human tone to everything; "you can laugh the louder when I have come by some clothes."

About noon Pelleas struck a rough road gullied by the winter rains, a yellow road that shone like wet gold in the sunlight. But the road brought him no helpful fortune. True, he met some wayfarers, but those he met were ludicrously useless. A fat reeve with heavy saddle-bags and a fiery face, whipped a mouse-coloured nag to the right about, and departed the way he came.

Pelleas shouted at a green cloak bellying with the wind:

"By the love of the Virgin, sir, there is nothing here to bolt from!"

But he was left staring at the fat green cloak, and the flick of the nag's hind shoes.

An hour later, Pelleas was begged from by two

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hairy beggars, who accepted his nakedness as a penance. Pelleas answered their importunities by begging in return. The fellows had fat wallets on their backs. They abused him, and brandished cudgels.

"God pities the poor," he said; "but you two rogues would beg from a man without a shirt."

So he smote one of them with his oak staff, and stared when the man seemed to find the blow so heavy. Pelleas was for picking the fellow up, but he scrambled clear and flopped away like a dazed hen, following his comrade, who was running with his wallets drumming his back.

Pelleas looked at his oak staff.

"I shall have to be careful," he said; "plainly, one cannot smite men as one smites an oak."

The next meeting was even less promising, for this time it was Pelleas who ran away. A couple of countrywomen on donkeys came round the bend of a beech wood, and Pelleas's legs bounded for the cover of the tree. The women, brown-eyed, and hard-faced, drew up giggling and chattering. They were too cheerfully coarse and open to be cowards at such a pinch.

"Come out of the wood, good lad," said one, "and I will lend you a clean shift."

They laughed like the green woodpecker, and sat back on their donkeys' haunches.

"If the beggars have stolen your clothes, my child——"

"Phut, cousin, the young man is cooling his love!"

Pelleas turned his back on their good-natured, ribald faces, and went in among the beech trees, wondering at the legend that told how all women shrieked and huddled at the sight of a mouse.

The road seemed a poor purveyor. It brought nothing in the guise of a poor Samaritan, and Pelleas began to understand that the spirit of sincerity may drag a man into puzzling corners. He might have jumped to the truth, even after ten hours' freedom—that the great world does not desire to see things naked. Truth is often more shocking to it than a man's body. Life has to be covered and disguised. Men make a patchwork quilt for it, and call the patchwork religion and law.

The sun was sinking in the west when Pelleas came to a woodland ride that branched southwards from the sandy road. The highway—such as it was—had helped him so little, that Pelleas deserted it for this green path that wound its way into the thick of the wilderness. Pine woods bordered it, and dead bracken and whortleberry spread away under the stiff shadows of the silent trees. A thousand spires began to blacken against the sunset, and Pelleas was aware of the fact that he was carrying a savage hunger. The smell of the dew on the grass may have quickened his sense of it, for at dew-fall the White Monks had straightened their bent backs in the fields and turned homewards for broth and bread. The Cistercians of Roding had taught

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Pelleas one good thing, and that was to bear fatigue on one round meal a day. He had never been clogged with heavy feeding, and could go from dawn to sunset on a hunch of bread and some water.

The green ride grew more overgrown and tangled as Pelleas followed it southwards under the evening sky. He had hoped for a manor house or some woodman's lodge, but the brambles that had rooted their long feelers across the path made it appear that the track had not been used for years. So rough and tangled did it become that Pelleas turned in among the trees where the dense summer foliage of the beeches and the poison of the pines had kept the ground clear of brush and bramble.

The prospect of a supperless night under the trees had made his thoughts hark back to the bread and the bowl of broth at Roding, when a distant sound made him pause and listen. The sound had a human note, and seemed nearer to him than he had first imagined. He pushed on, treading softly, and avoiding the crackle of dead wood. It was not long before the trees thinned before him, with streams of golden light slanting down into some open space, and Pelleas stood still awhile with a puzzled frown on his forehead.

From the open ground ahead of him came the incessant babbling of a thin and querulous voice that faltered between the prattling of a child and the chatter of a mad soul talking to the empty air. Sometimes there was a croon in the voice, some-

times a touch of decrepit anger. Pelleas could remember nothing like it save the praying of old Father Hilarius, who had grown foolish and soft in the head at the age of eighty.

A long, green bank brushed by the boughs of the beech trees, hid from Pelleas the open ground that lay ahead of him. But though it hid what he desired to see, the bank gave him the chance of approaching unobserved. He went up it on hands and knees, and insinuated a cautious head between the turf top and the branches of the beeches.

On the other side of the bank lay a stretch of undulating grass that rose into mounds and ridges, and dipped into shallow dykes, the mounds and ridges catching the sunlight, the hollows lying filled with the shadows. The trunks of the forest trees shut in this open space on every side as with a palisade. On a mound in the centre stood crags of ruined masonry smothered in ivy, a broken squint in the wall looking like a rent in a cloud through which the sunlight slanted. Two goats were cropping the grass, one of them with udders swollen and full of milk.

Pelleas saw all this with a few turns of the head, but the sight that astonished him most shrewdly displayed itself close to the foot of the bank on which he lay. A little old woman with hair as white as hawthorn bloom, and strange black-eyes in a strange and wrinkled face, knelt there polishing something smooth and round that she held in her lap. Beside

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her, wrapped in a gorgeous surcoat of green and gold, and belted with a red girdle set with precious stones, lay what should have been the figure of a man. Yet the white dome of the forehead, the shadowy eye sockets, the glistening teeth in the bare jaws, betrayed that the thing was nothing more than a skeleton.

Pelleas held his breath and stared. There was a trench in the grass close to the old woman, and a lid of withies turned back from it, also a number of faggots that had been piled in a heap. The thing in green and gold had a sword at its side, and gold spurs strapped to the bones of its feet. Pelleas saw that it was a helmet that the old woman held in her lap, and she had burnished it so that it shone like glass. From time to time she bent over the figure of death at her side, and babbled to it as though it had ears that listened and a soul that understood.

Pelleas slid back down the bank and sat there considering this strange picture that had been shown him in the heart of the forest. In later days it might have served as an Allegory—Death and the Lady, Time and the Vanity of Youth, The Grave and Riches. Looked at calmly, it was plain that only a woman who was mad would dress up a skeleton in state, and sit by it, and chatter incessantly. Pelleas asked himself what was behind this madness. Death had been here at some time, perhaps with violence, wiping out life and reason, and leaving white hair and a tragic madness behind him. The

furrows deepened above Pelleas's eyes. He sat there under the beech boughs, calling up visions of ruffianism and wrong, a young man so much in earnest that he looked like a saint in the wilderness defying the guile of the Devil.

The vision of this poor soul's madness made Pelleas forget for the moment that he travelled much as Nature made him. Picking his way among the trees, he climbed the bank at a little distance so that he should not drop like a hawk on the little old woman seated in the grass. He came within five paces of her before she lifted her head and saw him. Pelleas crossed himself upon the breast, and gave her a "Pax Dei."

The little old woman stared at him and said nothing, her lower lip drooping, her motionless hands resting upon the crown of the helmet. Her eyes puzzled Pelleas, they were so black and bright, like the eyes of a bird. There was a startled wonder in them, as though she had never seen such a creature before. And Pelleas remembered his nakedness.

But it was not that which awoke wonder in the woman's eyes. She rose slowly, letting the helmet roll from her lap to the grass, and keeping her eyes fixed upon Pelleas's face. She drew near to him, step by step, open-mouthed, incredulous, as though looking at one who had risen from the dead.

When she was quite close to Pelleas she stretched out a timid and tentative hand and touched him on the breast. It seemed to Pelleas that she had

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doubted whether he was solid flesh, and had expected her hand to pass through vapour. A curious flash of intelligence swept across her wrinkled face. She took the flesh of his arm between her thumb and forefinger, pinched it, and uttered a queer, breathless cry.

Pelleas found himself enveloped even before he had the chance of feeling astonished. Her arms were about his neck, and she was weeping, and babbling tender nonsense, using words that were half meaningless, half grotesque. Pelleas suffered all this, and said nothing. It was part of her madness, and he had not the heart to thrust her off. His coming may have made her remember the days when the thing yonder in the gorgeous surcoat had had flesh covering the bones of youth.

The old woman stroked his face.

"The green leaves were all red," she said.

Pelleas looked in her eyes, and nodded.

"And he went down into the earth where smoke was. There was a great snake in the forest. No—it was a dragon that ate up the stars. Ah—my desire! It was very cold down among the willow beds. They broke the roof timbers. The thatch was all wriggling snakes."

Pelleas's face was as grave and wise as though he understood all that she said. He was wondering how the great sorrow had come that had turned her brain.

She caught his hand suddenly, and drew him

towards the grave and the thing in the surcoat of gold and green.

"The pip in the apple core. Put it in the ground. Gently. See, the green skin of samite. The brown coffer was very full."

Pelleas knelt down beside that figure of death, put his hands together and said a prayer. The little old woman stood and watched him, a bright and feverish exultation in her eyes. She also knelt down and kissed the white skull.

"The seed in the earth. Plant it so that the roots go down."

She put her arms under the thing, and holding it as a mother holds a child, moved on her knees to the edge of the trench. Pelleas saw a great stone coffin in the grave, with an oak lid to cover it. He would have helped the old woman, but for the thought that she would not wish him to touch what was wholly hers. The helmet and the sword were laid in the coffin. The lid came down, also the roof of plaited withies. Pelleas helped her to pile the faggots back upon the place.

The little old woman took him by the hand and led him to the fragment of a ruin that was smothered up in ivy. An arched doorway with broken pillars in the jambs led to a low room that had been roofed with rough timber. There was a bed of bracken in one corner, and a stool standing under a hanging cupboard. The woman pointed to the stool and took a big brown jug from the floor.

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"My desire," she said, and kissed Pelleas on the mouth.

He felt a vague shudder go through him when her lips touched his. It was as though the soul in him answered to some mysterious sense of kinship. The old woman went out and called to the two goats. She knelt on the grass and began to milk the she-goat, the milk spurting into the brown jug.

Pelleas stood at the door and watched, fingering his chin, and trying to patch a meaning to the fragments of this broken life. The woman with the white hair kept glancing toward him, her face all smiles; and Pelleas was possessed by the conviction that she looked on him as on something that belonged to her by the laws of nature. He imagined that she had lost a life that was dear to her, and that her madness opened its arms at the bidding of mere impulse. Yet there was an eerie familiarity about the place that haunted him, and he had the feeling of having been there in a dream.

The sun was below the hills, and the woods were turning black. The old woman came in with her jug of milk and set it on the floor at Pelleas's feet. Then she brought bread from the cupboard, and broke a loaf for him to eat. Pelleas, who was wondering how she came by her food, felt that his hunger would be robbing her of the little that she had. He shook his head and smiled, and straightway saw her display strange distress.

"When he ate no bread—he was dust under the stone," she said.

Pelleas took a crust and began to eat, watching a smile well up into her eyes. Presently she took the jug and held it to his lips. The sweet, warm milk gave him a sense of infinite sadness, a sadness that had no reason in it.

Dusk came, and the old woman pointed to the bed of bracken. Pelleas had eaten her bread and drunk her milk, but rob her of her bed he could not.

"No, mother," said he, "that is your bed; I cannot thieve it."

She gave a quick start of the body and a lift of the head as he spoke, and her lips repeated the word "mother." For a moment she stood mute, yet smiling, smoothing her bosom with her hands. Then she turned from Pelleas, dragged part of the bracken aside, and spread it in another corner.

Pelleas felt a spasm of pity stirring in his heart. He kissed the old woman, not thinking her an enemy against his vows. He laid himself down on the bed that she had made, his oak staff beside him, and in the dusk he saw her go to the cupboard and draw something from it. A cloak was thrown over him, and dim hands brushed his face.

Pelleas lay awake a long while. He heard the night wind in the forest trees, and the occasional murmur of a voice that seemed to be making a long prayer.

III

Pelleas Runs Away from Himself and Falls Asleep in a Beech Wood

PELLEAS awoke very early, and saw through the open doorway a band of red light crossing the grey of the eastern sky. The first tentative notes of the birds quivered from the deeps of the forest, and Pelleas felt cold.

This coldness of the dawn made him remember his nakedness, and in remembering it he became aware of the cloak with which the old woman had covered him.

His first thought was that this cloak would be a godsend to him, but as for taking it, that was another matter. He rose on one elbow, glanced about the room, and found himself alone there in the strange and stealthy light of the dawn.

Pelleas left the bracken, and folding up the cloak with grave deliberation, laid it back on the bed where he had slept. The bleating of the goats came to him, and he remembered that the little old woman might be at her milking. Save for the two goats, there was no live thing to be seen in that green space, and Pelleas wandered to and fro, following the banks and the hollows, and telling himself that

some great house must have stood here in the past. The healthy hunger of a young man sniffing the dew and the dawn sent Pelleas's thoughts back to the old dame's cupboard. He re-entered the room in the ruin and examined the shelves, to find nothing but the third of a loaf of bread and an empty pot that once had held honey.

Pelleas admonished his stomach.

"You must start hungry to-day, my friend," he said, "for assuredly you shall not boast of the old lady's last crust."

This tendency towards self-repression, once encouraged, ran ahead to suggest that it would be better for him to go before the mad woman returned. He picked up his oaken staff, and then realised that he would go without thanking her, a sorry return for her strange tenderness. Pelleas decided that he would call it a fast day, and so escape from hurting her desire to see him eat. The plan pleased him, and he went out again to look for a spring or a pool where he could wash.

Beyond one of the green banks Pelleas discovered a goodly pool, clear, and free from weeds and the trampling of cattle. He went down into the water, and after making the sign of the cross upon his breast, fell to splashing like a great boy. The birds were in full song, filling the whole forest with yearning and exultation, piping in the greenwood as though they had known no true joy until that morning. The sunlight streamed through, and into

the pool where Pelleas washed himself and said his prayers to the splash and sparkle of the water. A thousand golden wrinkles went quivering toward the green banks, like laughter caught from the eyes of the dawn.

Pelleas had come up out of the water and was swinging his arms in the sunlight to dry himself, when he heard a voice far away in the forest, the voice of one who sang. Pelleas stood still to listen like a town boy who hears the voice of a thrush in a hedgerow. The voice sent a quiver of mystery through Pelleas, a thrill that ran from his loins, upwards, making him draw his breath more deeply and feel the blood leap from his heart. The voice drew nearer through the forest like light from under the shifting edge of a cloud gliding from tree to tree. It seemed to sing the song of the morning, the song of the dew and of the sunlight in the boughs of the oak trees, the song of the brown river water and of the western wind.

Pelleas climbed half way up the bank and stood with head and shoulders hidden behind a thorn bush. He saw that the little old woman had returned, and that she was standing and holding her brown jug while the two goats licked her fingers. She, too, was listening, a smile upon her face, her hair shining like snow in a ray of sunlight.

The voice drew very near, and then ceased with a lark-like dropping down out of the blue. Pelleas saw a white shape coming and going behind the

trunks of the trees. A streak of scarlet moved in and out like a torch in the forest gloom. There was a sound of hoofs among dead leaves, and the faint jingling of a bridle.

Pelleas, screened by the thorn bush, saw a young girl on a white palfrey ride out from among the trees, her red cloak glowing against the ashy trunks like the red flame of a fire. Her hair, parted over her forehead, and falling straight upon her shoulders, had the lustre and the blackness of coal. Her eyes seemed of the same colour, quick, darting eyes, restless and a little fierce, looking out on either side of her little hawk's beak of a nose. The skin of her face was a glowing brown, shading into olive, and showing no redness, save at the mouth.

The madwoman had started forward, and was holding out her hands to the girl with a foolish, crooning exultation. But Pelleas had no attention for her, and her madness. He was staring at this child of the forest with her straight black hair, her restless, midnight eyes, and her red cloak sweeping the white flanks of her horse.

The innocent inevitableness of this look was the tasting of strange wine by a man whose lips had been accustomed to nothing but water. A great upheave of emotion swept through Pelleas's body, and he felt his heart beating against his ribs, and the blood-heat of his body. He could not help but look at the girl with the intuitive kindling of youth toward youth. He was conscious, instinctively, and

yet with a white-heat of wonder, that this child had the shape of a woman, and that intoxicating ripeness of lips and bosom that dissolves the senses into dreams of desire. In an instant of time Pelleas felt many things that were strange, and even painful. He had a hunger after that red mouth, a desire to feel that hair of hers blown across his face by a stinging wind. All this strong yearning in his blood conquered and possessed him like a primitive impulse. It swept through and through from the heart, before he caught himself realising what manner of thing it was that had broken loose in him that spring morning.

Pelleas smote himself upon the mouth, sprang back down the bank, and stood there shivering. A cold wind seemed to blow through the heat of his body, for his teeth chattered and the skin grew rough upon his forearms. Ice and fire were contending together in his brain. His knees shook under him. He was scorched yet frozen, tempted yet filled with fear.

He struck himself again upon the mouth, blurted out "Christus Sanctus, Mater Dei," picked up his oak staff, and ran. Nor did Pelleas trouble whither his feet took him. He leapt into the cool shade of the forest trees as though his body were afire and the woodland were so much water. Running from himself like a man possessed, panting, sweating, with set mouth and dilated nostrils, he looked neither to the right hand nor the left. A whimper of passion

chased him through the forest's silence. He tried to outrun the pattering feet of his own thoughts, crushing aside glimpses of a red mouth and the provoking curves of throat and chin.

Pelleas ran on through the forest till sheer weariness chastened his rebellious flesh. He had sweated the fever out of his blood, and outrun the suggestions that had hunted him through the woodlands and over the moors. Yet his forehead had its three furrows strongly marked, and his eyes showed a sullen thoughtfulness, the self-scorn of a man who had conquered by running away. Pelleas held on at a swinging pace, taking the marks of the brambles on his bare skin as the well-deserved blows of a scourge, and driving his body as he would have driven a vicious and unbroken horse.

His mad burst through scrub and woodland had brought him into the hollow of a broad valley that showed him a river running between poplars and willows. The wilderness was broken by patches of meadowland, and on the distant hillside he could see brown fallows and the lush green of young wheat. The sun moved in a clear sky, and the day had developed into one of those hot and windless days that mimic the haze and the heat of summer. Pelleas felt very thirsty, and not unready to rest in the shade. He went down to the river, and leaning over the bank where the roots of a willow made a ledge above the stream, he scooped up water and drank from his palms.

About a furlong further towards the west Pelleas saw a wood of ancient beeches rising upon a low hill. A shimmer of green covered the branches, and the huge trunks rose from a carpet of dead leaves. The shadows of the wood looked cool and pleasant, with distances of violet gloom, grey pillars standing upon a pavement of bronze.

Pelleas made his way to the wood, swept some of the dry leaves together at the foot of a tree, and lay down to rest. It was near the drowsy noon of the day, and the beech wood was full of shadows and stealthy, creeping sunlight. He felt the drowsiness of the day playing about him like the hum of bees. He was soon asleep, one hand clutching his oak staff, the other under his head.

Pelleas lay there long enough for the sharp eyes of a lady who came riding with a hawk on her wrist, to catch sight of a man stretched under a tree. The lady may have put inquisitiveness or a possible pity before her coyness, nor had she the face of a creature that was timid. She left a page and a falconer at the edge of the wood, and rode in alone to judge what she had discovered.

Now Pelleas made something of a picture, white body and brown leaves, head thrown back like the head of a young god asleep in Arcady. Even the red scratches that the brambles and brushwood had left on his skin made the primitive quaintness of the picture more real. He lay there like a white statue on a bed of bronze, giving, even in repose, a sug-

gestion of great beauty and strength. The figure was the figure of a young man lying bare under the beech trees, without self-consciousness and without shame.

The woman reined in her horse and sat regarding the sleeping man. Her eyelids had narrowed a little and her nostrils showed more shadow. The look in her eyes expressed frank approbation, but behind that surface emotion lurked a puzzled and groping wonder.

IV

Isabeau of the Red Tower

PELLEAS woke suddenly on his bed of beech leaves to find a strange lady on a black horse staring down at him with intent and critical eyes. Pelleas beheld her as a big woman with a profusion of reddish hair, and a face that was remarkable for the pallor of its skin. The picture was complete, vivid, and vigorous, compressed into the curiosity of a momentary stare. He had come up against the woman as a man comes up against a sunset after following a path through a dark wood.

He sat up with a swift realisation of the supreme quaintness of his position.- After that first glance Pelleas did not lift his eyes to the lady, but sat staring at the trunk of a beech tree and wondering what was to be done.

The woman on the black horse betrayed no perturbation. Neither young nor old, she was richly dressed in colours of crimson and green, with precious stones sewn into the backs of her gloves, and bodkins of gold thrust through her piled-up hair. Her eyes, brown even to amber, had very black lashes, and the pallor of her skin gave to her hair an added fire. There was the flicker of an inward smile about one

corner of a very expressive mouth, and when she spoke to him, Pelleas was surprised at the softness of her voice.

"Young man," said she, "I am thinking that you have been robbed upon the road."

The voice was so unhesitating and so innocent that Pelleas turned his eyes from the trunk of the beech tree and looked up by instinct into her face. He knew that he had shown a sulky redness, and felt an overmastering desire to huddle himself up behind his arms. But the woman's level voice and imperturbable face steadied him. Her serenity, under the eyes of such a predicament, suggested great apathy or great boldness. Pelleas had not arrived at the state when a man draws such distinctions.

"My thanks to you, madame, but I have not been robbed on the road."

She continued to regard him with a look that challenged him to make his confession as bare as his body. Pelleas felt discomfited. He frowned hard, and was silent.

The woman on the black horse gave a little laugh that had neither malice nor pity in it. That laugh of hers made Pelleas look at her again, so that he caught her with mouth open, white teeth showing, eyes the colour of amber and full of brittle light.

"It might be mad Tristram of the songs," she said. "Truly, it is wonderful what tricks love will play with a man's brain."

Pelleas stared at the knees of her horse.

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"I know nothing of love, madame," said he; "nor of any Tristram. A man may start upon adventures——"

"Adventures! Ah, to be sure, the Great Wold is as full of adventures as the sky is full of stars. Some of us might ask to be served by a young man with a club!"

She spoke with the glib impulsiveness of a woman who knew how to utter tones in tune with a young man's conceit. Pelleas gave her a momentary flash of the eyes. The sharp red point of a tongue darted out at him directly he looked away.

"You are out after adventures, then?"

"I will tell you what my quest is," he answered.

She gave a woman's purr, and stooped—expectant.

"Ravishers—and robbers—and giants, eh?"

Pelleas's eyes came up with a blunt snap of candour.

"All in good time," he said; "but it is something of an adventure to be in search of a shirt."

She gave a quick laugh, and her laughter sounded so clean and buoyant that Pelleas echoed it, but with a palpable flushing of the forehead. His words had had the provoking quaintness of a sincerity that says laughable things in earnest. The woman's eyes sparkled.

"Come," said she; "I see that we shall be friends. Tell me why you are wearing that woolly cap?"

Pelleas's hand went to his head.

"A vow I have made," he explained.

She looked ready to put out a mocking, yet admiring tongue at him. This youngster appeared so splendidly simple.

"Women who are wise ask no questions. As for your first adventure, three miles might see the end of it."

Pelleas glanced at her sideways, remembering the rout of the morning. Yet he did not feel in danger from this woman. She had not provoked or challenged him, perhaps because he could not read beneath her face. At that time Pelleas was a great, strenuous, sacred simpleton. The woman laughed, showed him her eyes boldly, and he thought her as direct and adventurously honest as himself.

In ten minutes they were out of the beech wood, Pelleas marching with his staff over his shoulder beside the lady's horse. The falconer and the page followed at a little distance. The boy, who had screwed up an impudent and prematurely shrewd face, put out his tongue behind his mistress's back, and closed one eye at the falconer.

"One more fool," said he, "and a naked one! Good Saints, let us go down and wash in Jordan!"

Pelleas marched beside a woman who was a great lady in those parts. Isabeau of the Red Tower, widow, and mistress of many manors. Mesne men held of her by knight's service, and by labour upon her lands and dues paid to her stewards. She had her court of law, her high justice, her right to brand and hang, her charter of free warren, her forest

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rights, her tolls upon markets and at bridges. The deer in the forest lands about the Red Tower were her creatures. She claimed her heriot and the chattels of the villein sort who died upon her lands. She was a great lady with her white face and her flamboyant hair, a lady concerning whom many strange words were spoken.

Pelleas knew nothing of all Madame Isabeau's greatness as he walked beside her horse and let himself be lured into telling her more of his own affairs. The woman made it appear that she was very easy to talk to, for she seemed to guess all that he intended to tell her before he had spoken half of it. She glided in with suggestions, applaudings, sympathisings; persuading Pelleas into making confessions that were quaint and grim by reason of their stark earnestness. He was a nameless man out upon adventures, out to chasten the world with that club of his, and to bruise the Devil and all his progeny.

Dame Isabeau was supremely pleased with the madman. She kept a devout countenance, and looked down at him with those suggestive eyes of hers in which mockery lurked like green light in deep sea caves. Her sensuous mouth twitched into smiles, and then straightened itself suddenly when the man glanced up at her. She saw the broad sweep of Pelleas's bare shoulders, the depth of his chest, the way his whole body tapered to his sandalled feet. It was a physical satisfaction to her

to watch the muscles moving under the skin, and to mark the valiant way he carried his head. She guessed, too, what his strength must be when he carried a young oak tree as a club.

"Beware of all women," she said to him with a frank and sisterly gravity, "though it is the women who bring adventures. Be good to them—a little—if they are in need, but be on your guard when they begin to be a little good to you."

Pelleas thought her very wise and honest.

"I have no concern with women," he said, "save to help those who call on me by Our Lady."

Isabeau kept her mouth fast a moment. She looked at Pelleas out of the corners of her eyes, and the crude strength of his innocence made her desire him. It would be a quaint business to teach this grim young man to love. Her thoughts flew to and fro like shuttles working intricate patterns in rich colours. Moreover, she had realised that Pelleas might be of use to her, and she began to tell him of the strange things that were to be found in the forest.

"We have many wonders," she said; "wonders of strange beasts, wonders of miraculous trees, and pools, wonders of haunted valleys. But there is one man in the Great Wold whom we, in these parts, fear greatly. He is a very wise man, and a very wicked, even a great magician. It is whispered that he has brought many people to their death in the forest. They say that he takes the hearts and

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bowels of those whom he has lured to his tower, and that he makes of them strange and potent poisons."

Pelleas listened gravely, accepting all that she told him with such an air of whispering sincerity.

"Why has no good priest cursed the man?" he asked.

"They have cursed him often, and their curses have come back as sores and sicknesses. Once the Black Monks sent their holy relics against him, but the relics were scattered by invisible hands, and the monks beaten nearly to death. They say that no man has been found who is pure and strong enough to overcome this servant of the Devil."

She studied Pelleas's face, as though curious to discover how much he believed.

"The man who would overthrow this enchanter must be virgin," she said.

And then, suggestively:

"Certain knights have attempted it, but came to an evil end. This black spider can spin webs; evil spirits serve him. There is one spirit that takes the form of a young girl, a girl so beautiful that the hearts of those who behold her become like hot coals. And these knights were tempted, and were not strong enough to overcome the sin. So they fell into the snare and were slain."

Pelleas looked thoughtful, remembering the episode of the morning.

"Accursedly wise must this rogue be," he said,

"when he spreads such a net for those who would end his villainy."

Isabeau sighed deeply.

"He is like a curse over the land," she said; "and when the wind roars at night we shiver in our beds."

Spreading before them between the shoulders of two wooded hills, Pelleas saw a deep valley running toward the west. The ground fell away steeply into the blue distance, with here and there the pinnacles of a wood spearing up into the sunlight. It was a valley brimming with many waters, green, sparkling, all emerald and silver. There were the loops of a river gliding in and out among aspens and willows, and sleepy sedge-grown backwaters that spread into the meadows. The valley seemed full of great pools that shone in the sunlight, broad still surfaces that showed the clouds moving overhead, and the blue of the sky.

Under the shadow of a wooded spur that ran down into the valley Pelleas saw a tower rising from an island in the centre of one of these great pools. The tower had been painted red, and its walls glowed above the black water as though it were built of iron at red heat. Thousands of willows and aspens grew about the mere, and in the shallows were sedges and sword-leaved flags.

The falconer blew a note on a horn as they came down toward the mere, and a barge put out from a water-gate and crawled with long oars like a big beetle on the surface of the water. The men in the

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barge stared at Pelleas as they poled in to the stage. It was not only his nakedness, but the splendour and strength of his limbs and body that made them gape at him over their oars. Planks were run out for Dame Isabeau's horse, and she remained in the saddle, caressing the beast's black ears. Pelleas sat on the gunwale with his staff across his knees, watching the Red Tower loom up and overhang the barge. The reflection of the walls in the rippling water was a broken redness wrinkling into black.

At the water-gate a fat man in a black tunic stood waiting, a fat man with a face like a harvest moon, a chin that gobbled, and little squidgy hands that were never still. He gave Pelleas the blind stare of two prominent blue eyes, and bowed so low to Dame Isabeau that one wondered what became of his paunch. The great lady spoke certain words to him, and he twirled and was showing a bald pate to Pelleas with abominable servility.

The fat man led him to a chamber in the garden court where there was a great vat or bath of lead stamped with a chained hart—Dame Isabeau's device. He waited to serve Pelleas with clean napkins and a flask of oil, but Pelleas was silent, and stiff about the mouth. The old man did not please him, perhaps because he was so fat and so servile, and so well-satisfied with his servility. From the bath-chamber Pelleas was taken to a room in the tower, where white linen, a green surcoat, silken hose, and a girdle of red leather were spread upon

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the bed-quilt. The old man showed his bald pate, and left Pelleas to get into these gay clothes.

Pelleas supped that night at the high table, seated beside the lady of the place, and between her chattering and his own hunger he found little leisure for reflection. Pelleas did not notice that the hall emptied slowly of those who had supped, dim figures with white faces passing out behind the hangings, and turning half furtively to look at the two at the high table, before they disappeared. There were no lights in the hall save a torch on a bracket by the screens, and the fire that burnt on the round hearth under the louvre. Pelleas saw the smoke go waving up into the gloom of the roof, and the way that it vanished into nothingness made him think of the updrift of souls into the night.

He was silent awhile, thinking of the little old woman and that skeleton she cherished, and the young girl on the white horse. The woman beside him felt his silence like the sudden closing of a door.

"You are thinking of adventures," she asked; "or is it that you are tired?"

Pelleas held his head high like a man looking into the distance. There seemed no reason why he should hide these things in his heart. So he began to describe to Isabeau all that he had seen and heard.

He stared at the fire as he talked, but had he looked into the woman's eyes he might have seen a sudden shiver of light leap into them like hatred into the eyes of a dog. Her neck stiffened as she

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sat. She became watchful and bleak, studying Pelleas as he talked, yet keeping a white calm. Her mouth had hardened till the lips looked thin enough to cut instead of to kiss.

"Listen—you were near death to-day!"

She caught his wrist and held it, her tense arm quivering, her eyes looking into his. Pelleas was astonished at her fierceness. He stared at the white face under the piled-up hair that looked black in the dim light of the place.

"How, madame?"

She kept her hold on his wrist, and leaned nearer.

"It was all enchantment—devilry. We have heard tales before of that old crone and her skeleton. As for the girl on the white horse, she was a piece of magic—a wicked lure."

Her eyes held Pelleas's eyes.

"You would have me believe," he asked, "that all this was as so much smoke? The old woman was solid enough, for I touched her."

"Sin is solid enough, friend Pelleas, and this sorcerer of ours can make men see and feel just what he pleases. And the girl on the white horse was very beautiful? Ah, true! It is she who has lured many men to their death."

Her face seemed to blaze with some intense and inward anger, her eyes taking a reddish lustre and shining like points of fire. She bit her lips as though keeping back flaming words.

"The girl was very beautiful?"

"I have no knowledge of the beauty of women."

"Strange, indeed! If you had followed her you would have been among the shadows of Birch-hanger to-night. Hot blood, perhaps; and a cold ending! We of the Great Wold will bless the day when some strong man breaks the beauty of this curse."

She took her hand from his wrist, and sat silent and stiff, her eyes fixed on the fire. Pelleas had been moved by her fierceness and her emotion. It was as though she had thrown open a gate in a high wall, and shown him a great dragon waiting to slay or to be slain. As for her sincerity, it never entered his head to doubt it. The wonders that she vouched for were part of the mystery of the world. Pelleas believed in them devoutly. The book he had read at Roding had prepared him for all such marvels.

He sat awhile, with eyes that considered and a forehead that frowned. The thought flashed across the simple surface of his mind that he had been put forward by some good saint to take this adventure and follow it. It was possible that it had been ordained for him, and that the very flight from Roding had been prompted by the miraculous interposition of some holy power.

The woman beside him brooded, and watched. She had taken a loose tress of her red hair and was biting it with white teeth. There was great restlessness behind her eyes.

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Pelleas bowed his head as though he answered "yea" to some inward challenge.

"I will go further with this," he said; "it may be that I shall put an end to the curse of this enchantment."

V

Dame Isabeau's Mouth

SLEEP would not come readily to Pelleas that night as he lay abed in the room high up in the Red Tower. A full moon had risen, and Pelleas's wakeful mood shared the wonder and the mystery of the night. A dog bayed in the courtyard, but the sound had the effect of intensifying the silence. The mere lay like a pavement of black marble, with no wavelets lapping against the base of the tower.

Pelleas had lived through many strange moments in the course of the day, and chance had thrown him with singular suddenness into the life that he had sought. Vividly in the midst of his wakefulness he saw the proud, sun-browned beauty of the girl on the white horse, and Dame Isabeau's fierce pallor, bleak and steady as the face of the moon. It seemed to Pelleas that these two confronted one another with a mysterious hatred that disappeared into a fog of magic. Now and again moments of resonant incredulity beat upon his brain. He asked himself whether that figure of the young girl with the red mouth and the midnight hair was indeed nothing but a devil disguised in a beautiful human body. And yet there were the desires that had been

awakened in him, that heat of the blood, that simmering in the brain. Douce in her red cloak had never roused such desires as these, and Pelleas told himself that the thing that had tempted him had been a devil.

It was toward midnight when Pelleas fell asleep, and this sleep of his had lasted an hour when he started awake in bed with a loud cry and a flinging out of the hands. He sat up in bed with a shiver of fear, awakened from a dream in which torrents of black water had poured down to smother him. A wind had risen suddenly far off along the valley. Pelleas heard it sweeping out of the night, whistling through the aspens and the willows till it struck the tower and moaned about it like a desperate and dying thing clinging to something that it loved. Shutters banged and doors rattled. A cloud went across the face of the moon. In the court below the watch-dog set up a fierce howling.

Pelleas crossed himself, feeling the presence of evil in the moaning of the wind. The night had sprung from moonbeams and slumber, into a tumult of unrest. He heard the water splashing against the base of the tower.

The moon came out again, and Pelleas rose from the bed, and went to the window. The mere was scarred with lines of foam, and the aspen boughs glittered and clashed in the moonlight. Pelleas, greatly astonished, saw that the barge was crossing the water with long, labouring strokes of the oars.

In the barge stood a figure on horseback, motionless and black as jet, save for a sparkle of moonlight about its head. On the far bank among the aspen trees, a company of horsemen waited, spears erect, helmets glimmering, the wind tossing the dark manes of their horses.

The nose of the barge touched the bank, and almost instantly the wind ceased, and a great calm fell. The night grew quiet. The watch-dog rattled his chain, and turned into his kennel. The plash of the water against the tower grew less and less.

Pelleas saw the knight in the barge ride his horse up the bank and join those who waited. There was not a sound save the muffled beat of horses' hoofs as they turned and rode away among the trunks of the aspen trees. The barge had thrust out again and was re-crossing the mere, with wrinkles of silver running from its snout. Pelleas watched it, telling himself that it was strange that armed men should come and go at such an hour, and that the wind should rise so suddenly, and die away again when the barge touched the further bank. He had fallen asleep with his head full of marvels, and these happenings at midnight made him question his own eyes and ears.

He slept no more that night, and the coming of the day found him with a firm mouth and eyes full of a definite purpose. He was a young man buckling on adventure as he donned the clothes that Dame Isabeau had provided for him, and knelt in

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prayer by the open window. A white mist hung over the mere when Pelleas came down by a winding stairway into the main court. In one corner a servant was bending over a tub, and scooping water up over his head and shoulders. The watch-dog came out from his kennel with a friendly grin, and began to scratch himself vigorously and to rattle his chain.

Pelleas turned into a passage-way that opened into the garden court, and from this second court an alley led into the garden. Here were fruit trees standing in a stretch of grass, and paths that went to and fro between clipped yews. The blossom on the fruit trees showed pink against the misty blue of the sky, and the dew covered the grass with a veil of silver samite.

A palisade closed the garden from the mere; and a gate and steps led down to the water. Pelleas stripped off his clothes, hung them on the palisade, and sprang in for a swim. The mist lifted and the sun came through as he went splashing round the tower, sending ripples against the walls and against the black timbers of the barge that lay moored by the water-gate. One or two faces looked down at him from the upper windows, and a couple of giggling wenches put their heads together and threw him kisses. Pelleas turned on his other flank with his face toward the willows, his right arm coming out whitely into the sunlight, as he swam on his side. Three times he circled the Red Tower before he climbed out dripping at the gate in the palisade.

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Pelleas was fastening his girdle of red leather when Madame Isabeau came down the alley-way into the garden, a robe of black velvet trailing upon the stones. Her hair was bundled up into a golden net and covered with a lace handkerchief. To Pelleas she looked older, and a little pinched about the nose, and the white skin under her eyes showed violet shadows. She smiled at him as she came down between the yews with red shoes moving in and out under the hem of her black robe. To Pelleas her smile had the glitter of frost. She smiled with her mouth, but her eyes looked cold.

"Perhaps you have slept better than I have slept, my friend," she said, regarding him with a frankness that concealed care.

Pelleas had not the subtlety to understand that she desired him to tell her that he had slept like a ploughboy after a day's ploughing. He had slept very badly, and he told her so.

"The wind woke me at midnight," he explained, "and I got up and looked out of the window."

"Ah!" said she; "and what did you see, my friend?"

"Armed men waiting among the aspen trees, and a knight on a horse ferrying across in the barge."

His truth-telling sent a momentary shadow across her face, and she closed her lips tightly as though shutting back words of anger and impatience. Her eyes were the eyes of one who thought, quickly

turning over plausible lies and choosing the one that seemed most natural.

"Friends come and go in the night," she said, "and there may be pain in their passing to and fro. The knight whom you saw was my brother. It is three years since I have seen him, for he has been in Provence, using his sword against the heretics. He landed at one of the Five Ports yesterday, and rode this way to join the King."

She spoke with a level and unhesitating voice, and Pelleas believed her.

"Then the King is in these parts," he said.

Her eyes swept his face, and slanted aside.

"The King! Who knows whither he wanders when every man's mouth is the mouth of a wolf! The whole land is full of treachery. The curs begin to growl about the resting-place of the lion."

Her eyes were heavy and sullen, yet with vague smoulderings of unrest.

"What is the King to you?" she asked him with a sharp turn of the head.

Pelleas squared as though she had challenged him.

"No more than a name," he answered.

"A name! What name?"

"I have heard men mutter it through clenched teeth."

She flung out her hands with a bitter gesture, and stared at the Red Tower.

"Evil tales run like the wind. I know what is true and what is false. The King can love those

who desire his love. Well, what of that? What is it to us, here, in the Great Wold? Tell me whether the night has taken away your courage."

She gathered her black robe round her and began to walk to and fro with the sunlight playing upon her hair. There was impatience and unrest in the movement of her limbs. Her mouth fell awry, with pale lips tightening between a smile and a sneer.

Pelleas noticed these things, but they told him nothing, save that she seemed out of temper.

"A man should make his vows in the morning," he said, "and before he has made a meal. A full stomach may make a man arrogant; he should fast before undertaking any great deed or adventure."

A twitch of the shoulders was her protest against his sententiousness.

"Well, have you fasted long enough?"

"To be clear in the head, madame, yes. I will go and take this old man by the throat. It may be that I am strong and clean enough in the sight of God—and Our Lady."

She turned to him with a changed face. Her eyes were like the eyes of one watching the swoop of a favourite hawk.

"Well spoken, friend Pelleas. I do not doubt you, as I believe in God. Perhaps, then, you will go——?"

"To-day."

"So soon?"

"I am ready. Give me a guide."

"Yes. He shall show you the place, a tower on a great rock in the thick of the forest. If you come to it by night you will know it by a red window high up, and looking toward the south. That red window is the eye of the Devil."

A bell clanged, and Pelleas and the lady passed through the garden court into the great hall, and broke their fast together at the high table. Isabeau spoke of arms and a horse, but Pelleas would have none of them. He preferred his oak staff to a sword.

When he had broken his fast Pelleas went to the chapel and knelt for a while before the altar. As he prayed there he knew that a wind had risen, for he could hear the water beating against the walls. The east window was filled with painted glass, a briar rose winding about the limbs of a cross. The sunlight streamed through the rose flowers in the window, and painted red patterns on the stones before Pelleas's knees.

The sound of someone breathing came to him. He rose from his knees, and found Dame Isabeau standing in the shadow, and holding a silver chalice.

"Drink, Pelleas," she said. "I have signed the cup with the sign of the Cross."

He took the cup from her and drank, and when he gave it to her again their eyes met.

"I see that you are brave," she said, turning, and setting the cup on a stone bracket let into the wall.

She went out before Pelleas, but turned sharp

round in the passage-way, and caught him by the arm.

"Remember—the thing in the guise of a girl."

Her eyes showed red pupils, and she was white with eagerness.

Pelleas nodded.

"If you love life, do not parley. Strike with that club of yours, or throttle her with your hands. Be not deceived. Even if you make the cross before her, she will not fly from you. You will be tempted as never man was tempted before."

She looked in his eyes as she spoke, steadily, searchingly, without a tremor of the lids.

"If I kill the body," he said.

"The evil spirit will fly away. Be not deceived, or pleaded with. It was thus that the others fell."

She went with him to the water-gate where the barge was waiting, a little man in sheepskin sitting at the stern. The little man, who was a swineherd, had been given to Pelleas as a guide.

"God's speed."

He turned on the steps, and as he turned she put her hands upon his shoulders, stooped, and kissed him on the mouth. To Pelleas her lips seemed hot and eager. The light in her eyes puzzled him.

"God's speed," she said again. "Return to me with good news."

She watched the barge move away over the water, but Pelleas did not turn his head. That kiss on the mouth had left him cold.

VI

Pelleas Sets Out to Slay the Magician

PELLEAS'S guide was a godly little man with a goat's beard and a nose like the snout of a pike. For a swineherd he was amazingly learned in matters of religion, and in his knowledge of the names and the attributes of the saints. He halted at every mile, knelt down and prayed, taking up earth and smearing his mouth with it, and kissing a little holly-wood cross that he carried. His beard wagged through long processions of the saints, though St. Joseph of Arimathea was honoured with his especial confidence.

Pelleas had not seen such an example of secular godliness before, and he began to be impatient with the old fellow who bobbed down so frequently, looking like a goat squatting on its haunches and mumbling over a grey beard. All this devotion was excellent in its way, but Pelleas's religion was running into action, and the old man loitered and told the miles like beads upon a rosary. Pelleas imagined that the sinister nature of the adventure had much to do with the swineherd's godliness, and that he was taking precautions against being carried off by the devil.

He tried to learn more about this sorcerer who afflicted the Great Wold, but his guide shook a solemn head, and answered him with absurd shrewdness.

"Such matters are not to be spoken of, lording," he said; "they are even beyond a whisper. A hog is an animal with four legs. Man has two legs and a soul. In some men the soul is an evil spirit. In such a case I would rather converse with my swine."

"How much farther have we to go?"

"Many miles, lording. And each mile in these parts grows more evil. It behoves a Christian to be circumspect."

He flopped again, scraped some dust together with his two hands, spat upon it, and worked dust and spittle into a paste. Then he uttered the names of sundry saints, and smeared his forehead with the stuff, tracing a cross with a stumpy forefinger.

Pelleas had come to the end of his patience.

"Get up, my friend," he said; "we have had enough praying for one day."

The swineherd offered to anoint him with dust and spittle, but Pelleas was filled with disgust.

"A clean body and clean thoughts will serve," he said; "those who have washed do not run to the muck-heap."

He decided to rid himself of the fellow as soon as the swineherd had served his purpose, for this verminous piety was like the drawing of a dirty clout across the fresh flavour of a May morning. They

had left the valley of the Red Tower behind them, and were going northwards into the purple of forest-land and moor. A timber wagon met them drawn by eight oxen, and the swineherd was down on his knees instantly, almost under the oxen's hoofs. Pelleas's mouth hardened. He caught the man by his leather girdle, and lifted him to his feet.

"Enough of this!" he said. "Is the devil so much your master?"

The swineherd blinked red-lidded and pious eyes.

"The breath of oxen, lording, is held to be sweet and wholesome, and a defence——"

"Bah!" said Pelleas. "Is not a man's breath as clean as the breath of an ox?"

They went three miles farther, with the larks pulsing overhead, and the swineherd did no more praying. Once or twice he faltered, caught Pelleas's eye, and refrained. The land grew more wild and desolate, and the rough track dwindled to a bridle path. Great billows of gorse rolled in the sunlight amid dwarf birches and wind-torn firs. The sandy soil was full of stones; and in the hollows were treacherous places fringed with bog-asphodel and rushes, and carpeted with gorgeous moss.

The swineherd's red eyes scanned the horizon. He paused and pointed with his holly staff to a blue hill that rose against the northern sky.

"Birchhanger," he said, and promptly fell on his knees and gabbled.

Pelleas ignored him, and stood staring towards the

distant hill that looked like the domed top of a huge tree rising above the forest.

"How far?" he asked.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God—good St. Alban, most merciful St. Joseph——"

Pelleas prodded him with his staff, and pointed to the hill.

"How far?"

"Some three leagues, lording. The day is clear, and the place looks nearer than it is."

"And the way?"

"If you follow this path, lording, it will take you into a great wood. It is all wood from here to Birch-hanger. St. Martin defend us!"

Pelleas picked up a wallet full of food that the swineherd had carried from the Red Tower.

"Well, my friend, get you back again, and travel all the way on your knees—if it pleases you."

And since the man in the woollen cap gave him no largesse the swineherd put his prayers aside and cursed him as soon as he was out of hearing.

"May the wizard wither you into an old skin," he said, snapping his grey beard.

From which it may be inferred that even among devout folk there is no magic greater than the magic of money.

The path ran down hill and took Pelleas into a beech wood that seemed to spread itself for many miles. No sooner was he among the tree trunks than a sense of green mystery descended upon the

world, and the sky receded to a greater distance. Pelleas went deeper and deeper into the heart of the wood, and but for that ribbon of a path he would have taken himself to be lost among the multitude of trees.

The silence was so vast that he stopped, compelled to listen. Everywhere the smooth, dark trunks converged upon one another, sending up a tangle of boughs and budding green that glittered in the soft down-sheen of the sunlight. The roots of the trees and the hollows between them were covered with green moss, or half hidden by a litter of brown leaves. Withered bracken stood in thin silence, and here and there a dead bough lay like a snake with its head raised to strike.

The stillness was immense, and yet it was a stillness that suggested sounds. It resembled the silence of a huge cavern, out of which came strange whisperings distinguishable only when the eardrums had strained for a while with tense wonder. Innumerable crepitations seemed to come from the dead leaves. Pelleas fancied that he could hear the trees breathing, and from afar he caught the wild note of a bird.

The hush brimmed with awe. The silence stood listening with parted lips, and questioning, motionless eyes. It was as though strange things were about to happen. The heart hurried a little in its beating, and the ears strained to catch some sound from the vague distance.

Pelleas was still in the thick of the wood when he faltered suddenly in his stride and came to a dead halt, listening. A shiver of emotion went through him, for far away in the wood he heard a voice singing, and the song and the voice were the same that he had heard when the girl on the white palfrey had come riding through the forest. His eyes dilated, and his nostrils opened to take in air. The voice carried a wonderful thrill with it, and the singing troubled Pelleas's heart. It seemed part of the mystery of things, part of the enchanted silence of those listening trees.

In a moment Pelleas sprang to an understanding of what this voice portended. He tore its sweetness out of his ears, telling himself that this was enchantment, and that he was in the thick of an enchanted wood. That old man on the blue hill yonder was using his spells and his devils' lore for his undoing. Pelleas crossed himself and uttered a prayer.

"Lady of Heaven," he prayed, "keep thou my soul from all lust and unclean desire. Give me strength that I may come to this evil thing and slay it. So shall a curse be taken away from these people who dwell in the Great Wold. "

The voice came from the north, and Pelleas pushed forward, repeating to himself all that Dame Isabeau had told him at the Red Tower.

"Smite the thing with your staff, or take it by the throat and throttle it," he said to himself; "then

that which seemed a beautiful girl will turn into a foul, black devil."

The voice still led Pelleas through the beech wood, and though he broke at times into a run, he seemed to come no nearer to the singer. Once he fancied that he saw a woman looking at him from behind a tree-trunk, and he started sideways with a swing of the club. But there was nothing to be seen save the trees and the sunlight. The voice went on singing, drawing him deeper into the heart of the wild.

Suddenly it ceased, and the wood became again a place of green and shadowy silences. He stood and listened, his eyes steady in an alert stare. No sound came to break the stillness, and he pushed on along the path, keeping a keen watch on every alley that opened and closed before him.

Pelleas had covered another mile, and had heard no more singing, when he came upon a cross-ride striking the path that he was following. He halted, considered, and examined the turf, but found nothing more helpful than a hole where a rabbit had been scratching. Pelleas chose the way that went straight ahead, and after following it for several furlongs came abruptly on a black pool lying still and ugly among the brown beech leaves. Pelleas stared at the pool, for the water looked cold and treacherous, and the path had disappeared. He wondered for the moment whether this was a piece of magic, and whether the old man of Birchhanger had created this pool to swallow up the path. Pel-

leas went close and put his foot in the black ooze. A few bubbles came up, but the water was real enough, and when he crossed it with his staff, the pool still remained.

Pelleas retraced his steps, and struck westwards along the ride that he had passed several furlongs back. And since a great part of the day was spent, he sat down under a tree, opened his wallet, and made a meal. Once he fancied that he heard a voice singing in the distance, but he saw no live thing moving among the beech trunks save a few deer that trotted across the ride some fifty paces from where he sat. Pelleas heard the rustling of their feet among the dead leaves, and the sound was like a ghostly whisper in the midst of a vast silence.

The sun was low when he came at last to the edge of the beech wood and saw a hill rising steeply against the sky. Pelleas leant upon his staff, and shaded his eyes with his hand. The hill before him was covered with silver birches whose stems looked like white threads in the level light of the setting sun. A grassy valley dotted with thorns and oaks ran between the beech wood and the higher ground beyond. And rising against the sky line from amid the fretwork of birch boughs Pelleas saw the black shape of a lonely tower.

He remained there awhile, considering how he should carry the affair through, since the tower yonder must be Birchhanger poised on its hill between the dusk and the sunset. The valley before him

looked very peaceful, flooded with golden light, its great thorns ready to smother themselves with blossom. As for the tower on the hill, it resembled a warning finger raised against the blue-green north.

Pelleas braced himself, swung his staff, and started out across the valley, wondering when the wiles of the evil one would begin. He found his heart too cold for his own liking, and less devoutly murderous than befitted a zeal that was out to overthrow iniquity. Perhaps the peaceful valley made him a little incredulous; perhaps he was a little afraid. Pelleas told himself that it would be much more satisfactory if only the old man up yonder would set a fierce beast of a dog on him. He felt a curious desire for physical pain, something tangible and ugly to struggle with.

The dusk fell as he was crossing the valley, and sudden, against the northern sky, came the gleam of a light high up above the birches. A minute, oblong patch of redness showed in the black tower. It was the red window, the wizard's window that Dame Isabeau had spoken of in a fierce whisper, and Pelleas watched it, feeling a spark of devout anger being kindled in him by the thought of the evil that that red window typified.

As the dusk deepened Pelleas went scrambling up the hillside amid the birch trees whose white stems glimmered upwards into the blue gloom of the twilight. His thoughts climbed ahead of him, hurrying to deal with the unknown dangers that might

be waiting for him upon the hill top. That scramble through the birch wood gave Pelleas the sense of effort and of struggle that he needed. It was like scaling a wall to come to grips with an enemy whose wild eyes and sword point showed between the crenellations. Pelleas helped himself over the steep places by catching at the trunks of the birches. He dragged his oak staff after him, wondering as he climbed what manner of evil thing he would find to smite.

The brow of the hill came to him when he was hot and breathing hard, and conscious of a formless anger in his brain. A briar had slashed him across the forehead, and the long scratch dripped blood. Straight before him Pelleas saw a high wall, and behind it a jumble of high-pitched roofs clear-cut against the sky, and higher still the stern black straightness of the tower.

His eyes went to the red window that looked like a great square-cut ruby fastened upon a sable robe. Wisps of smoke curled out of it and vanished into the night. And as Pelleas watched, waving shadows went to and fro across the light, as of a tossing of arms over an angry incantation.

From the tower, too, came dropping the notes of a girl's voice, clear, casual, like leaves falling with a sad waywardness in autumn. The voice and the tossing shadows across the window made for the same peril in Pelleas's mind. The old villain up yonder was spinning out his spells.

Pelleas set his teeth.

"They would tempt me to choose death in sin," he thought. "Come, now, let us see whether God or the devil is the stronger."

He made for the door in the wall, and swinging his staff, smote it so that the timbers cracked. A second blow splintered it apart, and Pelleas dropped his club and putting his hands into the gap, rent the broken door in two as Samson rent the jaws of the lion. Snatching up his club, he passed through and found himself in a stone-paved court, narrow and dim. A white figure stared at him from the doorway of an outhouse, and then fled squeaking into a dark entry.

Pelleas heard the rattle of a chain behind him, and before he could turn, a watch-dog had him by the leg. The beast's teeth met in the flesh, but he shook the dog off, and laid him dead with one blow of the staff.

A voice from somewhere called:

"Ivo—Ivo, the gate!"

Pelleas saw the tower looming up over him. A flight of steps led to a doorway some six feet up the wall, and he sprang towards the steps, white fury on his face, for the dog's teeth had let the anger loose in him.

VII

The Devil at Birchhanger

PELLEAS went stumbling up a newel stairway, trailing his oak staff after him with the end thereof bumping on the steps. The stairway was in utter darkness, and the treads of the steps being very narrow towards the newel, Pelleas's ascent was more of a groping scramble up the sides of a black pit than a splendid assault given against the devil and his angels. But Pelleas was too headlong and in earnest for such a thing as comical self-consciousness. The blind simplicity of his purpose was nearer to tragedy than to the laughter of fools. He had come to trample upon something that he believed to be evil, and the impetuosity of his attack was as fierce as the fighting mood of a Norse rover.

A glimmer of light came down the turn of the stairway, shining on the wall and showing the steps as sharp black ledges. Pelleas found his eyes coming to the level of a narrow landing, above which spluttered a half-burnt torch. Three more steps and he saw before him an open doorway, and standing there, framed by the posts and lintel, the girl of the white palfrey whom Dame Isabeau had called a devil.

She was in her shift with one hand holding the

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loose folds over her bosom. Her black hair lay tumbled on her shoulders, and two bare feet showed white on the wooden step that led into a room. Her face was the colour of her shift, and in her eyes, astonishment and terror fought with flashes of naked pride.

For one moment these two stared at each other, mute, astonished, breathlessly mistrustful. Pelleas, with his broad back resting against the newel, felt abashed, and brought suddenly to bay. He saw the girl's bosom heave under her hand, her lips quiver and open as though she were about to utter a cry.

Instead, she said very quietly:

"What has happened?"

Pelleas stared and stood still.

She repeated the words, drawing back a little, and looking at him with wild eyes.

"What has happened? Who—are you?"

Pelleas had risen after the first plunge of astonishment, and Dame Isabeau's words crackled like foam in his ears. Here, then, was the trickery! Those naked feet, that white neck and tumbled hair! Here was the temptation that had brought men to their death. Pelleas snatched himself from the edge of his false pity.

The girl must have read the meaning of the menace in his eyes, for she sprang back from him and threw to the door.

"Out on you! Ivo—help—here—come quickly!"

Pelleas dropped his staff. He caught the door

before she could close it, and flung it back on her so roughly that it struck her and threw her against the wall. Pelleas pushed in with a glimpse of a rush-light burning by a bed in a corner, and clothes thrown in disorder upon a black oak stool.

Then the mad god-man in him acted with the passionate brutality of that red-faced tyrant, the god of the Jews. Pelleas saw a girl cowering against the wall, eyes dark with the pathos of her terror, one arm raised as though to ward off a blow. His fanaticism and his credulity turned this shrinking and half-naked girl into the creature of enchantment put forward to destroy him by tempting him to sin. He broke through the frail guard of her frightened hands, the absurd belief in his own purity and her foulness blinding him to the brutal roughness of his strength.

Pelleas caught the girl by the throat, the conviction strong in him that she would vanish or turn into some vile shape. Her hands closed on his wrists, and she writhed against the wall, her mouth open for air, her eyes blind with terror. She tried to speak, but the grip choked her.

A sudden spark of astonishment took fire in the back of Pelleas's brain. He became conscious of the fact that his fingers were crushing into a soft, warm throat, and that live flesh quivered in anguish under his hand. A shock of doubt went through him, and with it, hesitation, and a rush of shame. His fingers relaxed. The saner manhood in him pushed aside

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the mad godliness that makes men more pitiless than the beast of the forest.

His hand fell away from the girl's throat, and he stood staring, and watching her slip along the wall and sink into a white tangle. Her hands went to her throat. She choked, and drew in deep, spasmodic breaths.

Bewilderment, doubt, self-hatred, and pity descended upon Pelleas and submerged his wits. The solid floor seemed to slacken under him. He was in a quagmire of discomfiture, clutching at questions that might help him to safer ground. The girl struggled to her knees and covered her face with her hands. Great sobs shook her. Her hair fell down over her breast.

From bewilderment Pelleas passed into absolute trepidation. He had a vision of a white bird fluttering with broken wings in the mud. What was the meaning of it all? Had he been mad a moment ago, or was this remorse the truer madness?

He glanced round the room, and saw a little cross of cedar wood hanging at the head of the bed. Its presence there startled him, and threw his thoughts into still greater perplexity. He turned again to the girl, and found her kneeling, and leaning back against the wall, her wet face shining through the stormy tangle of her hair.

"What do you want with me, brute or thief that you are?"

The huskiness of her voice made the words more passionate.

"There is no money here. As for my body, kill me, rather——"

She began to choke, and Pelleas saw blood on her lips. And this blood of hers made him feel helplessly and foolishly ashamed. He frowned hard at the vision of a gross and grotesque blunder.

"Speak, now. Who are you? What is it that you would do to us?"

She gathered valour as Pelleas shrank into sulky impotence. Rising, she drew up her shift and held it there with her two hands. Pelleas could not meet her eyes. He looked glum, a man trying to disentangle himself from questions that he could not answer.

"Well, can you speak?"

He lifted his head sharply, and struck back with questions.

"This place is called Birchhanger?"

"Ah, well, what of that?"

"And there is an old man here, an enchanter, a weaver of evil spells?"

Her eyes flashed with surprise, astonishment, and anger.

"Are you mad, or a great fool?"

"I am neither mad, nor a fool," he retorted; "those who should know besought me to drive a devil out of this tower."

She tossed her hair from her shoulders.

"Some one has filled your head with wild tales. But why should I parley with you, a cruel fool who

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can take a woman by the throat because some devil has dropped lies into his ear!"

Pelleas stood and stared at her, opening and closing his hands. It had come to him with the passion of her scorn that this girl was very beautiful, beautiful in a way that he had not understood in the forest. Her body was no longer a mere body. It had become a thing that glowed and vibrated with emotion. The hands pressed over the breast covered with its white linen, seemed to breathe and quiver. Her stormy hair shook confusion into him, and her eyes would have made desire prostrate itself in the dust.

Pelleas stood before her in great bewilderment. The very room with its bed, its cross, its clothes heaped in diverse colours on the stool, cried out at him that he had committed sacrilege. His own instincts had turned, and were denouncing him.

"I was told this tale," he said, "and took it for the truth."

She looked at him steadily, as though judging his simplicity.

"Who told it you?"

"A woman."

"Ah!"

"A great lady who should be believed."

"Wait—that is different. I begin to see into the heart of this tangle. Over yonder, in the valley where the Red Tower stands, was it not?"

Pelleas nodded.

The girl's eyes changed their expression. Pelleas felt her shrink further away from him with a look of scorn and disgust. She seemed to see something in him of which he himself was ignorant. Her face hardened, and lost the gleaming beauty of its anger. A frostiness came into her eyes.

"I begin to understand," she said, "that a man may find himself less vile than his own promises. Go back to this woman and tell her that the sin you were to commit for her sake, proved too great for your courage."

Her eyes had the desire of driving him back towards the door. It was a new matter for Pelleas to find himself despised, the more so when he had come upon so grim and devout an adventure. He strove to think of the thing he should say to her, but no words came into his mouth.

He turned towards the door, paused, and looked back sullenly over his shoulder.

"If they have lied—" he said.

"How can that concern me?" she answered him, "when you came here as the creature of that woman."

Pelleas found himself under the torch on the landing, looking down the dim curve of the stairway. He picked up his staff and descended the stairs, running one hand along the wall, and feeling the darkness to be no more real than this bewilderment. Soon he was under the stars, and crossing the court with no one to bid him stand. He heard a breeze

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moving in the birch boughs as he stepped over the broken gate.

Above in the tower the enchanter's window was still red as a winter sun at sunset. Pelleas watched it a moment and then turned away towards the slope of the hill. His bewilderment was not bettered by a downward scramble in the darkness amid the birch trees; and anger crept into his heart, the anger of a man who suspects that he has been befooled.

VIII

Pelleas Jumps Out of Dame Isabeau's Window

PELLEAS spent the night under a tree, meditating upon the ignominious end of the adventure, and wondering which of these two women had fooled him with lies. At Birchhanger he had laid hands upon most solid flesh, or if it were devil's flesh, then the enchantment had been all the more marvellous. Pelleas's senses stood obstinately against Madame Isabeau's romancings. He was tempted to believe that she had set him on to take a young girl by the throat, though why she should have done the thing he could not guess.

There was a mystery here, and he told himself that he would follow it to earth. These two towers, the Black and the Red, fronted each other across the level of his consciousness; and some of the grimness returned to him as he dragged through the night with the moon sailing above the tree-tops. The episode up yonder amid the birch trees had stunned him for the moment, but he had one of those obstinate, hurrying heads that is made for butting at circumstances. Pelleas wished the darkness with the devil, and was devout in his impatience. He would march back to the Red Tower as soon as daylight made the path through the woods possible.

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The moon went and the day came, and Pelleas finished the food in his wallet, shouldered his staff, and set off through the beech forest. The day was still young when he climbed out to the open country where the swineherd had left him the day before. Pelleas turned and looked for the blue dome of Birchhanger, and beheld it in the distance, dim and strange against the northern sky. Pelleas regarded the blue hill with a sulky dissatisfaction that had taken offence at its own foolishness. He had cut a mad and monstrous figure over yonder, if the evidence of his senses was to be believed.

Pelleas's incipient disgust sent him striding the quicker for the valley of the Red Tower. He had covered two miles of the moorland when he came to a place where four ways met, with a stone cross standing on a hillock. Seated on the green mound under the cross were two women in red cloaks and gaudy tunics. They had a basket between them, and were making a meal, and they had slung two bundles and a viol tied in a bag, on the arms of the cross.

The two women watched Pelleas with a peculiar, hard-eyed intentness, glanced at each other, and smiled.

"Whither away, my dear?" said the bigger of the twain, who held a stone bottle in a capacious lap.

Pelleas was in doubt as to the ways, and he was still more puzzled by the women's faces. They

were daubed and dissolute, and their eyes had a hungry boldness.

"I might ask you that question," he answered, meaning to be debonair.

The women laughed, and the fat one with the flouncy lap twitched her skirt.

"Ask it, sweet gentleman, and come along with us. We have been dull enough on the way."

Her companion, a brown woman with sharp eyes, was taking bites from an apple, and munching the pulp with a voracious movement of the jaws. Pelleas thought them queer wayfarers, but they might be able to show him the road.

"Which way do you travel?" he asked them.

"Any way, my dear, though most often to the devil."

"Which road for the Red Tower?"

The women stared at him, and at each other, and burst out laughing.

"To the Red Tower, lording?"

"Ah, we would not travel that way, though we might call the lady our sister."

They laughed, pulled grimaces, and looked at Pelleas's grave face as though it were one of the quaintest things on earth.

"Saints, what a sweet gentleman! To see such a one in the spider's web!"

"A fine, lusty lad!"

"Dame Isabeau is a noble lady."

Pelleas frowned at them, and assembled his dignity.

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"Since I have no time to waste," he said, "I will ask you to show me the road."

The fat vagrant pointed southwards with the bottle.

"The red head lives yonder."

And Pelleas heard them clucking and exclaiming as he passed on down the road.

His cogitations centred themselves on the discovery that the world appeared to be overburdened with women. Three days of errantry had brought him nothing but petticoats, and the only man he had smitten had been a rogue of a beggar. The Holy Fathers of the Church had taught him that woman was the seed and core of all evil; that adder's poison was under her tongue, and wantonness in her bosom. The spirit of chivalry ran counter to the growlings of the Fathers, and yet Pelleas was half tempted to confess that the women seemed capable of giving a deal of trouble. The two rowdies in the red cloaks had given his simplicity a flick of the whip. They had opened their mouths and mocked him when he had spoken of the Red Tower, and Pelleas wondered what judgment such gaudy queans could pass upon the great lady who had sent him on this adventure.

The thought struck him suddenly that the madness of the adventure arose from nothing but the madness of the poor lady's brain. She was afflicted of God, and therefore fit to be made a mock of by sluts who were ready to laugh at an ass's hind legs. Pelleas considered this suggestion with all serious-

ness. He recalled certain strangenesses, certain queer tricks of voice and eyes. It was possible that Madame Isabeau had imagined the curse of this enchantment, and that it was nothing but a mad medley begotten out of a sick brain. Even if her madness had made worse than a fool of him, the poor lady was to be pitied.

Pelleas had persuaded himself into a magnanimous mood by the time he came to the valley of many waters, and saw, under the sunset, the Red Tower overtopping its bloody image in the mere. The stillness of the place as he approached it was the stillness of a haunted ruin. No life showed there, though the bell in the gable end of the chapel began to toil, sending out notes of measured despondency.

Pelleas came to the water stage where the yellow flags were in bloom. He saw the barge lying at the water-gate, but not a soul was to be seen, and the windows were dark and empty slits. He put his hands to his mouth, and shouted many times before a man appeared, stared at him across the water, and unfastened the barge.

As Pelleas mounted the steps from the water-gate, with no sound in the evening stillness save the drip from the man's oars, an old woman came round the angle of the wall. She was thin and hawk-faced, with high shoulders and a lame foot, and her gown was of some brown stuff, her wimple as white as snow. Her whole figure seemed to breathe

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secrecy, and to hobble with finger on lip. She came close to Pelleas, peering up into his face, and touching him with her fingers.

"Hst, lording. I am Drada, madame's bed-woman. And she is deathly sick."

The old woman took Pelleas by the sleeve of his surcoat, and led him into a dark passage-way.

"Put your staff against the wall, lording. Pray God you have killed that old devil of the hill, for I fear that he has sent my lady her death-mark."

Pelleas looked hard at the old crone, and noticed that her eyes glistened as though she were a hungry bird on a perch and saw raw meat being brought her. Here then were more intricacies! It appeared that the best part of a man's life might be passed in listening to the voices of old women.

Pelleas had a young man's horror for anything that was old and ugly.

"I have been to Birchhanger," he said; "but as for your enchanter, I saw nothing of him."

Drada held up shocked hands.

"Dear Lord, then you have not slain him! You come back alive! Perhaps he put magic in your way?"

Pelleas stood out stubbornly against any confession. These matters needed consideration, and women told such different tales.

"The old man of the hill escaped from me," he said. "What is amiss with your lady?"

Drada had drawn back, but she again came close

to Pelleas, and touched him with her lean, contriving fingers.

"The villain has made an image of her, and wounded the image in the bosom. He knew that she hated his wickedness; and his malice is like the tooth of an adder. My lady has a flux. She is a-bed. And yet it may be, lording, that you can save her."

Pelleas misliked the crone's restless, picking, intimate hands.

"How?" he asked bluntly, on his guard against more mad missions.

Drada cringed, and became more eloquent.

"Ah, you are so good, such a white heart; you have no knowledge of these evil charms. I have learnt many things; I was born in a hay-loft, and my mother was a bit of a witch. Come, now, there is a power that can stop a flux. The touch of a King may do it, or the touch of a holy relic, or the touch of a saint's hand. The hand of a young man who is a virgin has great virtue. Lay your hand to the place, say three Pater Nosters, and call on Christ Jesus, and on Mary—His Mother."

Pelleas considered. The old woman seemed so urgent and so earnest that she might be as mad as her mistress. Were all the women either mad or insolent? None the less he saw no shame in humouring her.

"I will give your lady such virtue as is in me," he said.

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Drada's eyes gleamed with cynical blessings. She touched his clothes, and then recoiled, as in fear.

"Sst—they have been near the accursed place! You must wash, and go in naked, or the curse will cling."

Pelleas stared at her.

"There should be no shame, lording, in such a thing. My lady found you naked, and clothed you. Will you not strip yourself to help her in her affliction?"

The plea seemed just, and Pelleas acknowledged it.

"I will go and wash my body, and pray awhile in the chapel," he said. "God grant that my virtue will serve."

It had grown dark when Drada came to the chapel for Pelleas, carrying a bronze lamp slung by a chain. She beckoned him, and he followed her, repeating his prayers as they climbed the great stairway of the tower, with the darkness opening and closing upon the light of the old woman's lamp. Pelleas walked with his arms folded across his chest, his head bowed down, his face hidden by the shadows.

They came to a door under an arch, and Drada opened the door, and stood aside for Pelleas to enter. The sardonic glitter of her eyes was lost to him, for she held the lamp behind the folds of her skirt. Pelleas crossed himself, and passed in. He heard Drada close the door behind him.

A shaded light burnt in a corner, making a little

circle of light in the midst of the darkness. Against the wall stood a great bed, its posts carved in the shape of dragons, its purple quilt brodered with silver stars. Pelleas saw Dame Isabeau lying there, her shoulders propped by pillows, her two hands pressed over her breast. The intimate dimness of the room was surcharged with faint perfumes, and upon a table stood silver cups and a flask of wine.

Isabeau looked steadily at Pelleas, and drew in deep, long breaths.

"So you have come," she said; "what of Birch-hanger? How did it befall?"

Pelleas met her eyes, and they were full of a smouldering light under their half-closed lids. Her white shoulders showed above the purple quilt, and her hair lay spread upon the pillow.

"I went—and I have returned," he said, and he told her all that had happened.

Isabeau lay still and listened. Her lids narrowed, showing streaks of sinister light.

"So—you were tricked," she said; "it was as I feared; the magic was too strong for you; you should have kept your grip on the girl's throat. Yet—you were lucky to escape death. The old man yonder struck back at me, and let you escape. Pelleas, what would you do if I should die?"

He looked at her with grave eyes.

"Your woman spoke to me. Whatever virtue I have in me is yours. I have cleansed myself, and prayed."

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She rose in the bed, and showed him her bosom. It was very white, with a red stain over the heart.

"Put out your hand and touch me," she said.

He went to the bed and laid his hand upon her.

"Pater Noster——" he began.

In a flash he felt her arms about him, drawing him down towards her. She threw words in his face with a fierce, intimate whispering.

Pelleas recoiled, as though bitten by a snake. He turned to the door, tore at it, and found it fastened on the other side. There was a broad window in the wall, and through it he saw the rim of the rising moon.

A figure came between him and the window. Pelleas put it aside with a thrust of the open hand. He sprang to the window seat, looked down, and saw water twenty feet below him. The tower wall rose straight from the mere. He poised himself and dived, thrusting himself off hard with his feet, so as to clear the shallows.

IX

The Man-Hunt

PELLEAS made a mighty splash in deep water, and for the moment the breath was beaten out of his body, and he lay on his back and paddled with his hands. The tower rose sheer above him, ruddy black in the level light of the rising moon. It resembled a great pillar that supported the firmament, the stars sweeping over it as though fixed to a huge wheel.

The perturbed ripples played about Pelleas's ears as he floated, and recovered breath. Lights came and went behind the windows of the tower, with yellow gleams shooting out from the squints of the stairway, as of torches going to and fro. Pelleas turned on his side and struck out for the further bank. The plunge into the water had sent a flush through him, and he did not foresee the forlornness of his outgoing, naked and hungry, and with hatred at his heels.

Pelleas had neared the bank when a bell began to ring upon the island, jerking its clapper fiercely, and giving out sharp, stunning notes. Coming to the shallows Pelleas stood waist-deep in the water, and listened, his head and shoulders outlined against

the moon. The baying of hounds broke out in answer to the clamour of the bell; and the whole island, so silent an hour ago, seemed to wake to a woman's anger.

Pelleas climbed out and waited. It was the unmistakable baying of hounds that he heard over yonder, hounds on the leash, and straining for the chase. Pelleas had heard the sound before when a great lord had lodged a night at Roding, bringing a pack of hounds with him. Presently torches came to the water-gate, with men leading dogs and horses. The black snout of the barge swerved slowly, and pointed out across the water.

Pelleas's face grew bleak and keen. Despite the White Monks of Roding, his blood was hot and human enough for intuition to tell him that he had roused the wild anger of a woman. His trampling upon her power to tempt him would never be forgiven, and all the stir yonder was on this account.

Pelleas made no tarrying. There was little honour to be gained in a scramble with brute beasts who had their fangs, while he was naked and without so much as a stout stick. The moonlight shone on Pelleas as he ran, and Dame Isabeau, who rode bare-back and astride behind her huntsmen and her hounds, saw the dim flash of his white shoulders, or the pale breadth of his back. This chase by moonlight went northwards across the valley, Pelleas making for the woods, and hoping to trick the dogs in the thickets.

Pelleas gained the woods and ran so lustily that the pack trailed out, and the mounted folk were distanced, being afraid to ride at a canter among the trees. Run as he might the fastest hounds were closing on his heels. If he climbed a tree he would have the whole pack round him, and the men who followed might be more dangerous than the dogs. Pelleas began to feel the mad fighting spirit in him, the spirit of the beast that turns and stands at bay. Doubling down an avenue of oak trees, he glanced back as he ran and saw three galloping shapes throwing swift shadow blurs on the short sward.

Pelleas whipped round and caught the first hound in its leap. He swung it aloft and hurled it against a tree. Before he could guard or dodge the other two were into him, one fastening on his thigh, the other gripping his right flank. It was a battle of grim and naked beasts, with snarlings, writhings, and the roaring voice of a man. Pelleas shook the hounds off, stove in the ribs of one with a swing of the foot, and taking the other by the throat and belly, broke its back over his bent knee.

He ran on again, with blood trickling from thigh and flank, and hearing as he ran the whimpering of the dogs who paused to sniff at their maimed comrades. The rest of the hounds were galloping in a bunch; Pelleas could tell that by their tongues. He was still running through the oak wood, and wondering how he could trick the beasts without being forced to climb a tree, when a clump of brushwood

crackled ahead of him, and a solid shape pushed out into the moonlight. Pelleas swerved in his stride, and dodged the charge of a huge wild boar. The beast went by like a boulder from a mangonel, and Pelleas, jumping for the drooping bough of an oak, swung himself aloft, and lay along the bough, waiting. The boar recovered himself, turned, and trotted back towards the underwood with his snout in the air. Pelleas heard the hounds coming; so did the boar, who plunged in among the bushes with urgent and savage grunts. There was a commotion amid the hazel sticks in the moonlight. The boar had his female with him, and their black shapes went ploughing through the brushwood.

Pelleas blessed the boar, and lay along his bough and waited. He saw the hounds coming like flicks of foam through the shadows. They swept on and under him, making a wind that he could feel and laid themselves hard upon the heels of the swine. Pelleas saw them disappear into the thickets, and climbing along the bough, he hid himself in the great nest where the oak boughs spread from the bole. Nor had he long to wait before he heard horses cantering, and the voices of men. Crouching there he had a glimpse of the woman Isabeau riding a black horse, her hair slanting over her shoulders, and a whip in her hand. The moonlight touched her face as she went by at the head of her men, a face that was eager, white, and hard.

Pelleas remained some while in the tree, shiver-

ing with cold after the heat of running, and feeling his wounds raw, bleeding, and bitter. The sounds of the chase died away in the distance, with the hounds following in the track of the boar and his mate.

If the abbey life had seemed hard and uneventful, these few days in the larger, wilder world had crowded experiences upon Pelleas with an impetuosity that had left him a little bewildered. Hungry, and bleeding, hunted by Nature for having affronted her in the flush of her passion, he looked down on life from the fork of an oak tree, and found it as desolate and empty as an ascetic soul could desire.

Pelleas heartened himself, and pretended to see a reasonable purpose linking all these happenings. He was being tempted and ill-used for the sake of a finer patience and a stronger discipline; serving his novitiate in a rougher and more riotous house; meeting winds that had not reached him behind the walls of Roding.

Pelleas climbed down from the tree, telling himself that he ought to bless the boar and his mate, and not grumble over his own misadventures. There was nothing for him to do but to follow his own nose till it led him once more towards the savour of men and women. Feeling his wounds stiffening, he retaliated upon the limitations of the flesh by setting his legs at a steady tramp, striking out a path that should take him further from the Red Tower

and its lady. He was obstinately active all that night, showing no mercy to that good brother of an ass—his body. The wilderness passed behind him with its interminable trees, its white mists, and its moonlight, its open spaces that looked grey and grim. By the time the moon was in the west, Pelleas had worked up so importunate a weariness that he lay down in the wet grass, and slept like a savage.

The sun had risen some three hours when he awoke to the sound of a horn. He sprang up, wincing as the blood clots gave in the wounds that had stiffened while he slept, and discovering that the straightening of his body had started the wound in his flank. Each step he took was like the rending of fresh strands of muscle, yet the dolor of his wounds was less urgent than the wailing of the huntsman's horn. Madame Isabeau and her hounds were still scouring the forest, after chasing and slaying the boar and his mate.

Pelleas was in poor fettle for a second ordeal. He had eaten nothing for hours, and his wounds had lost him precious blood and strength. None the less Dame Isabeau's hounds got on his track that morning, and followed him with a fierceness that soon brought the naked, limping figure into danger. Nothing but native obstinacy kept Pelleas on the run. He plodded on mechanically, mouth awry, lips blue, leaving red drops behind him on the grass and leaves. His stride grew shorter, and shorter

till it became a faltering patter of feet that went on and on into sullen weariness.

The hounds were hot on the blood trail, and close upon the swaying, staggering figure, when Pelleas broke out into a narrow valley with a river running through it, and steep slopes of grass descending in the sunlight from the darkness under the trees. On the grass slope opposite, Pelleas saw a girl on a white palfrey, and beside her two men in Lincoln green, one of whom held the bridle of a pony that carried the body of a fat buck. The girl had a bow and a quiver full of arrows at her back, and she was looking across the valley with her eyes shaded by her hand.

The sight of her struck a spark of hope into Pelleas's brain. He went rocking down the hillside to the river, plunged in, and began to swim with manifest feebleness towards the further bank. The girl sent one of her men forward to help Pelleas whose head came gliding slowly behind the tired outshooting and outsweeping of his arms. She herself rode down nearer to the river and halted on a green knoll to watch the hounds streaking the opposite slope, with the woman on the black horse, and her huntsmen at their heels.

The foremost hound had taken to the water by the time that the man in green had got his hands under Pelleas's arm-pits and was helping him up the bank. The girl had taken a dozen arrows and laid them across the saddle. She fitted an arrow to the string, and waited.

Pelleas and his helper returned up the slope, Pelleas hanging his head, too weary and too blind with weariness to feel such a thing as shame. The muzzle and forepaws of the leading hound came thrusting up over the edge of the bank. As he pulled his haunches up after his head, the girl bent her bow, and shot the beast in the shoulder.

He fell back with a yelp, and hound after hound came up to catch those sun-streaked arrows in chest, throat, or flank. The girl was unflurried over her shooting. It was done deftly, swiftly, unerringly. Only twice did she miss her mark, and the man who bent a bow beside her, wiped out the victims that she left him.

Harsh and angry voices were calling back the rest of the hounds. Some of them had been leashed, and struggled with the men who held them. Madame Isabeau, red hair tumbled about an evil face, rode down to the river and drew up on the bank. The girl on the white palfrey remained motionless upon her knoll, and these two woman looked across at each other while Pelleas lay panting on the grass.

The pupils of Isabeau's eyes were big and staring. She said nothing, but sat biting her lips, and looking slantwise at the river, and the carcasses of her hounds in the further shallows. Her men had brought no bows with them, and the girl on the white palfrey yonder stood in the path like a figure of fate.

These two women knew each other, and hatred and scorn met in the air between them and battled

like hawks. Isabeau was the first to turn away, with a savage jerk of the bridle, and a twisting of the lips.

“To-morrow—or some day,” her eyes said, “we shall be quits for this.”

X

Pelleas at Birchhanger

SHE on the white palfrey, even Joan of Birchhanger, looked down at Pelleas as he lay, and knew him for the man who had broken in and laid rough hands on her two nights ago. She knew him first by his woollen cap, and the leather fillet about his forehead, and then by his face that had come so near to hers in the fierceness of their struggle. Yet the only emotion that she showed was a cold and wondering disgust. Why she had troubled to save this briar-scratched man she could not say. He inspired no pity in her, and the impulse that had made her use her bow had sprung into being at the sight of the woman who rode the black horse. Joan of Birchhanger and Isabeau of the Red Tower had hated each other ever since men had quarrelled on their account at the King's Feast at Roymer two summers ago.

Pelleas was nothing but a bone snatched away, and guarded half in spite. If the girl troubled to ask herself questions about him, the answer came that he was some rough fool whom that leopard Isabeau had first fondled and then smitten. His very exhaustion made her feel a curious contempt for him. One of her men had raised him to a sitting

posture, but Pelleas, directly the prop of the man's knee was withdrawn, fell flat like a loose-jointed doll.

The second forester had unstrapped a cloak from the pony's back. He covered Pelleas with the cloak, and stood waiting.

Joan of Birchhanger threw a quick yet casual glance at Pelleas. A certain charitable prejudice seizing the vacant place of pity, argued that it would be ungenerous to leave the fellow lying there naked. She neither hated nor pitied Pelleas. It was a matter of indifference to her whether she repaid him his roughness to her at Birchhanger. The girl had a cold serenity that did not stoop to spite.

She pointed with her bow.

"Hang the buck to a tree, Roger, and put the man on the pony. What must be, must be. You can come back for the buck to-morrow."

So it befell that Pelleas was taken to Birchhanger on the back of a pony, and laid in an out-house upon a truss of straw.

If Pelleas had any romantic notions in that obstinate head of his, nothing that happened to him at Birchhanger should have helped to make those notions blossom. He was left to himself on his bed of straw in the out-house, with a horse-cloth to cover him, and an old woman to bring him his food and to dress his wounds. Rats peeped at him with black eyes from their holes, and a few hens would wander in and scratch in the straw on which he lay. There was no stepping down of beauty from her throne,

no dainty and debonair tricks of womanliness to freshen the brown bread and to soften the straw. The wound in Pelleas's thigh had shown a tendency to fester, and the old woman who came to dress it with oil and linen, was deaf as a stone wall, and amazingly ill-tempered. Her hands were abominably dirty, and the finger-nails stood out like talons. She had wisps of hair on her chin, and Pelleas thought that he had never seen anyone more ugly.

He lay there, and worked a solid amount of thought into the hours, meditating on the significance of his misadventures. Youth accepts its own importance with intense gravity, and Pelleas never doubted that numberless unseen beings were busying themselves with his earthly pilgrimage. He saw himself a strenuous, striving figure, followed and watched by good and bad angels. He had been lied to by a woman, tempted by a woman, hunted by a woman. The devil had laid an ambushade for him at the very outset of his campaign, and Pelleas felt a little flattered by the attentions of the devil.

But towards Birchhanger he was ready to humble himself with instant sincerity. Even the brown bread and the straw were coals of fire, and Pelleas magnified their virtue because of his own violence. And here, too, Pelleas was immensely serious. He honestly believed that Joan of Birchhanger must be in a fever to hear his confession, and to have him asking her pardon for laying hands on her that

night. The traveller imagines that everyone is waiting to hear his tales of adventure in strange lands. Pelleas was in a hurry to blurt out the truth, and to show his gratitude. He did not ask himself whether his misadventures and his gratitude were matters that concerned Madame Joan.

Pelleas, with energy accumulating in him, tried to make the old woman carry a message.

"Your lady—I must speak to her."

Never had a crone seemed more deaf. She sat on her heels, stared at Pelleas, and shook her head.

"You speak a strange language," she said. "I can make nothing of your nonsense."

Pelleas put his hands to his mouth and shouted. His nurse scratched her chin with a talon, and appeared bewitched by his woollen cap.

Pelleas could have cursed her.

"Shave your chin, old fool," he said.

So great an effect have age and ugliness upon the virtue of a man's gratitude.

On the seventh day of his sojourn in the out-house, when his wounds were on the mend, the old woman brought Pelleas a rough brown smock and tunic, a pair of sandals, and a wallet full of bread.

"My master wishes you a good journey," she said, and added on her own authority: "And a godly dread of loose women."

The hint that they would be rid of him was very frankly given. Pelleas accepted it blandly, and was glad of the chance of covering his body. A beady

cunning in the old woman's eye sent his thoughts travelling below the surface. None the less he was grateful for the gift of the brown smock and the liberty it gave him. The out-house walls had been his clothing, and he had not put himself into the sunlight. Thanking the old woman, he asked her the way to the nearest town.

For once she appeared to hear what he said.

"Greygore lies by the sea," she answered; "and Roymer north of the Forest. Both are very wicked towns, ready to swallow young men and fools."

And she went off, cackling like an old hen.

Pelleas decided that she was an abominable old creature, probably because he suspected that she had been laughing at him for days, and that he had not had the sense to see it. He put on the clothes, fastened the sandals, and stood for a while in the doorway of the out-house. It opened upon a narrow, sunless court, with chickens scratching the sour black earth, and the winding-gear of a well showing in one corner. Above a thatched roof rose the dark mass of the tower, bannered with a long white cloud. Across the court a passage ran under the beams of an upper room, giving a glimpse of green grass and the grey stones of a paved path.

It appeared to Pelleas that these people had left him to follow his own devices. They had sheltered him for a few days, given him clothes and a pair of sandals, and were minded to trouble their heads no further about him. He was astonished that no one

betrayed any curiosity on his account, for he himself was exceedingly curious to see more of the people of the place. There was the old man of the tower, the old man of the red window. And as for the girl of the white palfrey, the singer of strange, sad songs, Pelleas had a very human inclination to set eyes on her again.

He crossed the court towards the passage, and passing along it, found himself in a second and larger court, turfed in the centre and with a paved walk running round it. Pigeons were strutting on the grass, and under a pent-roof sloped against the northern wall were a number of hawks upon perches. One of the birds set up a great flapping of wings, and greeted Pelleas with raucous screams.

The bird's screaming brought a girl from a doorway set in the northwest angle of the court, a girl in a faded green tunic, her black hair tied up with a few strands of red wool. Her leather shoes that once had been covered with gold filigree work, were chafed and worn. She had a knife in her hand, with which she had been cutting up meat for her hawks.

She paused sharply, the flowing motion of her figure stiffening into curves that gave a suggestion of resistance. Pelleas caught the momentary impatience of her forehead, and the start of resentment in her eyes. Yet almost immediately a callous serenity covered her face. If Pelleas had noticed her worn, work-a-day clothes, he would have forgotten them in the striking chill of her pride.

They regarded each other in silence for some moments, a silence that resembled the settling of water after the plunging of a stone. Yet this silence was putting the two asunder, contrasting them vividly, balancing them one against the other. The repose, and the self-confidence ran all towards the girl. Her face waited. She looked from above. Pelleas—the man—had the lips of a stammerer.

A moment ago he had had so much to say; and his own voicelessness begot anger, and a desire to justify himself. Joan of Birchhanger was looking at him as though she saw something and nothing; and Pelleas felt that her eyes called him a fool. There rose suddenly to his remembrance the debonaire graciousness with which the noble folk had treated one another in that book of romances that he had read at Roding. Pelleas caught at the quaint magniloquence of that bookish language as a muddled orator catches at some familiar phrase.

"The grace of the good Saints be with you, fair lady. If your sweet hands can dispense pardon——"

The words turned in the air and gibed at Pelleas as he uttered them. The attempt to play with fine phrases made him ridiculous. They were not cloth for his coat.

The girl regarded him as though he were a clumsy animal trying to dance to the sound of a pipe.

"I had forgotten," she said, "that you were still here. They told me your wounds were healed."

Her air of aloofness, as of standing above some

utterly impersonal matter, put Pelleas under her feet. She could not have trampled on him more victoriously than by displaying the careless surprise with which she rediscovered his existence.

Pelleas stood dumb, quashing a ridiculous impulse that would have carried him forward into explanations. He drew back towards the opening of the passage.

"It is of no concern," he said; "but I came to say that I was sorry."

Her level glance looked beyond such things as candour and humility.

"That—one might take for granted. Do not be too ready to believe all that you are told."

Pelleas felt that he had walked into a courtyard where all the doors were closed and where calm and contemptuous faces watched him from the windows. His chief desire was to get away from the place as quickly as he could.

"If you would tell me the way to the gate——"

She pointed her knife down the passage by which he had come.

"The kitchen entry is yonder. They will tell you, if you ask."

The turn of her shoulder showed that she had nothing more to say to him, and Pelleas echoed that impression. He told himself that it would be easy to hate this serene and comely young woman. Certainly he had nothing more to say to her, and no desire to set eyes on her again.

XI

The Inn in the Forest

WHEN Pelleas turned to look back at the high hill with the glitter of its birch trees, he discovered an unexplainable melting of his resentment against Joan of the Tower. Something that he could neither describe nor account for came into his heart, a subtle emotion that was like a faint perfume or the sound of music afar off. Pelleas had come down through the birch trees, hating the girl for her cold pride. Yet into this tawny cloud of hate had flashed the vivid streak of a sudden recollection. Pelleas's right hand had reminded him of the soft, warm throat that it had gripped so roughly. The memory of that softness and warmth transfused itself into the hard brilliance of the girl's beauty. Pelleas was astonished to find himself taking her part against his pride. And what was more, he experienced a curious pleasure in the act, and in this impulse towards tenderness discovered things that were strange, adorable, and provoking. He remembered the worn shoes, the strands of wool binding the black hair, and somehow those details made the cold vision of her become human.

A charcoal burner leading an ass laden with

paniers full of charcoal, put Pelleas upon the road to Roymer, that town with white walls, set like an ivory casket upon a cloth of green and gold. Pelleas fell into a pleasant melancholy as he followed the great road through the Wold, a melancholy that spread into a mood of ardent self-abasement. He did not suspect Nature of touching with subtle fingers the strings of his heart. This happy, intent humility enveloped him like the sunlight, and he believed these heart searchings and these meditations to be of himself and for himself alone.

"My friend," he said to his own soul, "you have begun too arrogantly, and too blindly. Pain and provocation have been begotten by your over-eagerness. No single good thing has come out of this adventure, save the humbling of your own too hasty pride."

Some two hours after noon Pelleas saw smoke rising from a valley, and a lonely plunge of the road into an oak wood brought him to a black-beamed house standing by the roadside. It was a woodland inn, and the resting-place for travellers who travelled the Wold between Roymer and the sea, a great, black-timbered barn of a place, shut in by oak trees whose branches brushed the walls. Its huge corner posts and brackets were rudely carved, and the thatch, thick as a truss of hay, came down in places to within three feet of the ground, giving the house a mysterious, shadowy, black-browed look as though it thought strange thoughts and

concealed them from the world. The domes of the oak trees went up and up towards the blue, and in the deeps of the valley were stretches of grassland, flakes of gold flung down amid the darker undulations of the woods.

Pelleas stopped at the door of the inn to ask for a cup of water, and a tall scrag of a man with the throat of a vulture peered at him and sent him round to the back yard. Pelleas's humility stood the test. He passed round under the black eaves, and came upon a man seated upon an upturned bucket, and gloomily munching bread.

A room or cook-house was being added to the inn, for Pelleas saw a timber shell, roofed with grey stone, waiting for the mud or plaster to be spread upon its laths. A small heap of yellow clay lay covered with a wet sack, and beside it stood a tub of water in which floated a moulding board and a wooden trowel. The man on the bucket sat staring at the heap of clay. He himself was of a kindred colour, snub-nosed, stunted, and with a sour grumbling jowl. His hands and his clothes were smeared with clay, and his chin showed a good week's beard.

The man turned his head and looked at Pelleas with sulky and uninterested eyes. He said nothing, but watched the new-comer go to the well in the yard, let down the wooden bucket, haul it up, and drink as though he had not drunk for days. This fellow's capacity was enormous, and the man on the bucket seemed impressed thereby. The strength of

Pelleas's thirst led him to consider the strength of his body.

"Fair weather for the time of year, Master Beggar."

Pelleas put down the bucket from which he had been drinking, and faced the yellow man. It seemed a blessing from Heaven on his humility that this fellow should take him for a beggar.

"Fair weather for a good thirst," he said.

"Ey, to be sure. You carry a lusty belly."

Pelleas surveyed the oak framework waiting to be plastered, while the man on the bucket admired the set of the stranger's shoulders and the girth of his chest.

"They are building a room on there. Good timber, by the look of it."

The yellow man grabbed at a grievance.

"Devil take it, the job is on my shoulders! How can a master man play the beast of burden and fetch and carry his own clay? A rat of a lad I hired ran away to Roymer, and the folk here are cursing me for being so slow."

Pelleas asked him what his craft was, and the man laughed at him with bald complacency.

"Mud-sticker, that is what I am. I travel all over these parts. Any reeve or farmer will tell you that he knows Dick of the Trowel. More work than a man can manage. And the clay pit here two furlongs away, and no one to carry the stuff—curse it."

Pelleas caught the mud-sticker's right eye cocked at him inquiringly.

"It may be that a lusty young limb like yourself——"

He paused dramatically, tossed an imaginary coin, and jerked a thumb at the building. Pelleas considered the suggestion, and found that it agreed with his new spirit of humility.

"What do you offer?" he asked.

The mud-sticker spread the fingers of one hand, and knocked down each finger in succession as he disposed of work, wages, food, and lodging.

"They provide me and my man with food and drink here," he said, "and give us a bed of straw in the kitchen. As for the hire money, it is more than I pay as a rule."

Pelleas considered the offer. The occupation given him was very different from the slaying of giants and sorcerers, but he told himself that he lacked some of the cruder wisdom of the world, and life in an inn yard might provide it. And it did.

"So be it—I will work for you," he said.

The mud-sticker struck his fist into his palm, jumped up, and went in to shout for a mug of mead.

So Pelleas was taken into employ at the inn among the oak trees, and became a carrier of clay, which he dug from a pit in the forest and carried in a great basket to the yard where Dick of the Trowel worked. For two weeks Pelleas carried clay, persevering in this humble labour, and choosing St. Christopher for his particular saint. A crisp, tawny beard began to cover his chin, and the shaven crown of the monk

decreased daily, though Pelleas still wore his wool-len cap to guard against a betrayal.

Pelleas thought the mud-sticker a profane hound the first day that they laboured together, for the man cursed incessantly, and the more he cursed the better he worked. But a profane tongue is not the worst part of a man, and since much of the mud-sticker's cursing had no meaning for Pelleas, he bore with it, and was none the worse. Dick of the Trowel had a sound heart, and a good deal of shrewdness behind that round, snub-nosed face of his. He was the very man to play the rough pedagogue to Pelleas's magnificent ignorance of life; and many times he listened to his under-man's questions with a delighted and half-incredulous twinkle. The two became friends, and Pelleas was enlightened upon many matters.

The true man is of the earth earthy, and the warm juices of his manhood have their being in his body. Breath, blood, meat, drink, hunger, love of a woman, the greensward in the light of the dawn, the desire of the deed that calls! These things matter more than heavens and hells, and the solemn sayings of vain old men. The sunlight falling upon a brown urchin paddling in mud is more significant than moonlight falling upon an ascetic's face as he raves at a window.

Pelleas needed dandling in the broad and careless lap of the world, and that woodland inn was a good wet-nurse to him, giving him the milk of human

affairs. People came and went; great folk paused on horseback with little folk licking their stirrups; men quarrelled over their cups, and women laughed at them and were sly. Yet, above all, Dick the mud-sticker with his clay-stained hands and his shrewdly profane mouth, taught Pelleas some of the world's wisdom. Pelleas's humility abode with him at the inn. He kept his mouth shut, and his ears open; and no one took much heed of him, which was good for his self-esteem.

About the eighth day of Pelleas's clay-carrying, the mud-sticker sat on an upturned bucket with a mead horn in his hand, and held forth on the wonders of the Great Wold. He talked of Roger Gillingham's wild beasts, lions, bears, and pards, kept within the great stockade at Imping; of the Brackenhurst outlaws whose captain was said to be a woman; of the Lady Stone that bled on Passion Sunday; of the mysterious almond tree at Rush Abbey, that bore fruit showing the impress of the face of the Christ. When the mud-sticker stopped for a pull at the ale-horn, Pelleas asked him whether he had ever seen the Red Tower in the mere. Dick of the Trowel remained silent a moment, and gave Pelleas a queer, baffling look.

"Maybe I have," he said; "the Great Wold is a strange country. There is no man living who knows every corner of it, and the wild things that happen there."

Pelleas told the man of the clay that he had passed

two nights in the Red Tower, but said nothing of his adventures. Dick of the Trowel nodded at him, drew the back of his hand across his mouth, and grunted.

"Madame Isabeau is a great lady," he said; "and she keeps a perch for a noble falcon. God defend all fools and vagrants who venture there, for I have heard that such have been served up as raw meat for my lady's hawk."

Pelleas was incredulous.

"What—for a bird?" he exclaimed.

The mud-sticker spat with emphasis.

"Bird—bird be damned! A noble hawk with the legs and loins of a man, and the heart of a devil! I say no more. Ten thoughts in the noddle are safer than one rash word. Such stuff is not fodder for young sheep; 'twould scour like rank grass."

The mud-sticker's lazy hour was over. He rose from the bucket, and Pelleas picked up his basket to go for more clay.

"There is a hold called Birchhanger," he said.

"Birchhanger, eh! Old Roger the Bookman squats there, year in, year out, and leaves the ruling to his daughter. A fine, swift-eyed, haughty wench, young Madame Joan."

Pelleas shouldered the basket, but loitered a moment.

"I have heard that she is hated by the Lady of the Red Tower."

The mud-sticker eyed him blankly.

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"That may be so," he said; "but I know nothing concerning it. A wise man does not trouble about other folks' quarrels when he is sure of a good dinner."

One wet evening early in June, Pelleas was splitting wood in a lodge that opened on the road when a gaudy fellow on a grey horse came cantering under the oak trees towards the inn. The man had a hard and insolent face, and looked in an evil temper. As he turned in from the road, he caught sight of Pelleas and shouted to him with the casual arrogance of a man accustomed to cursing servants.

"You lout—over there, come and take my horse."

Pelleas looked the gentleman over, and saw the rain dripping from his blue hood, and running down his chin. The horse was mud-splashed to the belly, and had the appearance of having been over-ridden. Pelleas said nothing, and went on with the splitting of his wood.

The man's face was a red flare.

"Hi—you clod! Am I to shout twice, for courtesy?"

Risbert, the keeper of the inn, came running out, splashing through the puddles. His long, lean body seemed to fawn as it ran, even as a cur's body fawns on someone whom it fears. Guy, Risbert's urchin of five, came paddling after his father, flourishing a bladder tied to the end of a stick. Wet-nosed, he stared at the stranger, and then galloped aside into the shed where Pelleas sat, and buffeted him with the bladder.

The gaudy gentleman stuck out his feet in the stirrups, and swaggered.

"Hallo, old Sack of Bones, clean your house for Stephen de Rupibus and his company. They will be here before dark, five knights, five esquires, and the boors, all wet through and cursing. Bustle up! Your dull hole must do its best."

Risbert grinned like a dog.

"We have a full larder, lording," he said, "and dry beds to put you in."

Guy had burst his bladder upon Pelleas's back, and was watching the rider of Stephen de Rupibus disappear into the yard. Pelleas continued to cleave logs into billets. The boy's burst bladder reminded him of his own over-inflated pride.

The urchin became loquacious, and inquisitive. He had often amused himself in Pelleas's company, squeezing up clay balls, and spattering the stable door with yellow blurs.

"Why do some men have red faces?" he asked.

Pelleas's hatchet stood wedged in an oak block.

"Go and ask the gentleman," he said.

The boy regarded him seriously.

"You don't know. Perhaps it is because they eat raw meat."

"It may be," said the wood-splitter.

And the boy sat down and began to make patterns with the white chips on the wood-lodge floor.

The rain still purred on the thatch, and rattled on the dense foliage of the oaks, though the pools in the

road showed the golden gleams of a breaking sky. A small stream ran at the back of the wood-lodge, bubbling over the washings of the forest. The water was yellow with mud, and made a complacent gurgling under the stubs of the hazels that grew in the banks.

Pelleas, looking up from time to time from his wood-chopping, saw two figures appear under the oak boughs that met and made a green arch above the road. The two figures were diminutive and distant, two streaks of colour moving through sunlight and through shadow. As they neared the inn Pelleas saw them as two women in gay colours, wet and bedraggled, and with a certain dubious alertness about the eyes that glimmered between hunger and discontent. One nudged the other with her elbow as Risbert came out from the inn and studied them under his hand.

Pelleas had a clear view of the innkeeper's face. Its expression began with an ill-tempered stare, changed to interested alertness, and finally smeared itself with a sly and self-congratulatory grin. Risbert went out and met the two women at the wooden bridge that spanned the stream. And the three stood there and chattered with mysterious good humour.

The faces of the women were familiar to Pelleas, though he could not remember for the moment where he had seen them before. Under their drenched hoods wet strands of hair lined their cheeks.

and the damp blues and scarlets of their clothes clung close, showing the outlines of their limbs. One carried a basket, the other a viol in a case, and both had wallets under their cloaks.

They stood and whispered with Risbert, their whispers breaking now and again into gusts of laughter. The hungry, chattering movements of the taller woman's mouth gave Pelleas's memory its opening touch. They were the two women whom he had passed on his return from Birchhanger to the Red Tower, the two women sitting on the green knoll under the grey cross.

Their bargaining came to an end with an oath or two, some laughter, and an affectionate smacking of Risbert's lean face. The three turned and went towards the inn, the women walking with an encouraged and jaunty air, as though they had come by good luck at the end of a vile day. They skipped across a big puddle that lay in front of the inn doorway, and disappeared under the dark down-jutting of the thatch, the vanishing of their gaudy skirts synchronising with the sudden sound of horses trotting along the woodland road.

A knot of jogging figures came into view, with surcoats and cloaks of diverse colours massed about a figure that seemed all gold. Horses, black, brown, and dapple-grey, came trotting together along the aisle of oaks. The clatter of hoofs and the murmur of voices joined themselves to the gurgling of the brook.

It was thus that Pelleas, working as a humble

wood-cutter, had his first glimpse of a great lord and his people. They were brave, garish, insolent folk, young men with hot eyes and strong teeth, loud words, and a flaunting grace of action. Risbert and his horse-boy came running out from the yard, the inn-keeper shouting to Pelleas to come and help at a pinch.

Young Guy had run out shouting, to be cuffed indoors by his father for fear of the horses' feet. Pelleas left his wood-splitting, and joined Risbert as the great folk came thundering over the bridge. Bridles were thrown at him as the horses came sailing in, the riders seeming to overflow the place and to smother it with the colour of their clothes. Stephen de Rupibus, clad in wet cloth of gold, looked at the puddles as he sat his horse.

"Too much dirt," he said; "we have had enough dirt on the road to-day."

Risbert led the lord's horse close to the inn, growled something at his horse-boy, and ran round to hold Stephen de Rupibus's stirrup. Pelleas saw the horse-boy, a long lath of a youth, throw himself flat on his belly between my lord's horse and the inn door. Stephen de Rupibus dismounted and walked along the lad's body into the inn.

Pelleas stood still, angry that one man should use another's body with such dishonour. The values of a brown smock and a gold surcoat were being contrasted for his benefit when the handle of a whip struck him lightly on the head.

"Wake up, oaf—you have a broad back to bridge a puddle."

A youngster with a daintily clipped red beard was looking down at him with an air of laughing impatience. Pelleas returned the stare, dropped the bridle, and walked back to the wood-shed, and resumed his work.

"I am no Christopher for such gentry," he said to himself; "a man may carry clay, but not such bundles of pride."

In due course Pelleas, being hungry, made his way into the kitchen where fat Malkin, Risbert's wife, and her girl were sweating bare-armed before the fire. There had been a mad plucking of fowls, and the place seethed with feathers, and smelt of singed flesh. Risbert was on his knees in a corner tapping a barrel of mead, the stuff spurting into his face before he could get in the spigot.

Pelleas asked for his supper, and Dame Malkin's swollen red face with the nose of a sow rounded on him with screaming indignation.

"Supper, supper indeed, for a mudman's booby when I have a great lord, ten gentlemen, and their servants to cook for! What next! Get out of my kitchen."

There were manchets on the table, and Pelleas took one as he turned to go. Risbert's wife was after him like a fury, holding an iron spoon full of boiling fat.

"You dare to touch the food set out for your

betters! White bread—for a lousy beggar! Put it down, or I'll scald ye with the grease."

Pelleas surrendered the manchet. It was not easy to argue with a woman whose tongue was backed by a ladle full of boiling fat.

He went out, feeling that the world was full of unjust and corrupt motives, and met the mud-sticker in the yard. The man of clay laughed when Pelleas told him how matters stood.

"There is a way even with shrews," he said; "leave it to me."

Dick of the Trowel succeeded where Pelleas had failed, for he reappeared with a plate of broken meat, some bread, and a jug of mead.

"Round by the wood-stack, my son," he said. "Honest men are best out of the way when great folk are upon the road. We will put this food inside us; that will be the only safe place for it to-night."

Torches were lit in the guest-room as the dusk came down, and with the dusk appeared my lord's baggage cattle, men and beasts muddy and very hungry. The inn yard was crowded with sumpter mules, some of them vicious enough to kick the mildest of Christians. Men jostled, swore, ran to and fro, peered into the kitchen and sniffed the scent of food. Pelleas and the mud-sticker, snugly hidden between a hayrick and the woodstack, made their meal in peace.

Dick became talkative when he had finished up the mead.

"They are on the way to Windsor," he said, jerking a thumb towards the inn; "I wish the King joy of them, for there are many such gentlemen ready to tear the crown from his head. As for the King, some say he is a devil incarnate."

Now Pelleas knew nothing of the passionate questions of the moment, and of the rising wrath of the land against the brutality of the Angevin John. The King was a mere name to him, a name hated at Roding because the Cistercians had suffered at his hands. Pelleas's ignorance made the mud-sticker treat him with good-natured toleration.

"You are a queer fellow," said he; "a man might swear you had come out of a hermitage. Any beggar on the road could tell you that the King's name is a great and stinking sore. The whole country holds its nose, because of the stench. And know you, that this royal John has trampled the land like a stallion tearing up the sod in spring. He has torn men with his teeth, defiled their women, eaten their corn. And their patience is out, despite their terror of this great beast's teeth. The Barons are gathering to claim a charter."

Pelleas asked the mud-sticker whether all the lords of the land were like Stephen de Rupibus and his company.

"Not by any means," quoth Dick; "God forbid that they should be so."

The night came with stars, and Pelleas and the mud-sticker lay down to sleep under the haystack,

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for there was no room in the inn. From the guest-chamber rose a woman's voice singing some southern song to the plaintive notes of a viol. Loud laughter, and the voices of men talking all in one breath poured out from the torch-lit windows. The mud-sticker grunted and called Pelleas a fool when he roused him and asked how the gentry were amusing themselves yonder.

"Go and look," he said. "How long is it since you were weaned?"

XII

Master Goliath Comes to the Inn

STEPHEN DE RUPIBUS and his company rode on next day, but the two women remained at the inn, having struck a bargain with Risbert and his wife. Pelleas, as he came to and fro with his basket of clay, heard the viol being played in a little upper room, and the chattering voices of the two women as they sat at a window that opened under the thatched peak of a gable. The window overlooked the yard where Pelleas and the mud-sticker were at work, and very often the women seemed to have no other occupation than to sit up above and watch Pelleas with his basket, and Dick handling his smoothing-board and trowel.

The mud-sticker kept the corner of an eye on the window, a mistrustful and unfriendly eye that never flickered into a wink. Pelleas was franker and more ready to stare back, till his companion told him a few broad truths. And Pelleas, in his serious austerity, looked no longer at the window in the gable, but went to and fro with a straight mouth and steady eyes and a wondering disgust in him that such things should be.

Now the younger of the two women, who was

named Mella, had brown hair and a kind mouth, and when she sang to her viol her voice could sound soft and tender. More than once Pelleas came face to face with her about the inn, once when she was coming back from the brook carrying some linen that she had washed, and again, in the meadow that he had to cross on the way to the pit where he dug the clay. The woman's eyes sent him a tentative offer of friendliness, half bold, half timid. Pelleas passed her by with a flash of the eyes to the horizon and a straight setting of the chin. Youth, with its inexperience of the tragedies of life, and with its book of laws written in crude black-lettering, is apt to be more fanatical and severe than age. It cannot compromise, or grasp the lenient tenderness of a mellow season. Some men see only the sin and not the suffering of sin, and an innate prurience may make them afraid. Pelleas had yet to learn that self-righteousness needs the devil's kiss on its forehead, and that no man is wise until he has been made ashamed. So Pelleas passed the woman by as though he had not seen her, nor the glimmer of goodwill behind her tired tawdriness.

It so happened next day that drovers came through the forest with ponies and cattle, and some of the beasts were very wild. Soon after noon Pelleas was crossing the meadow with his basket when he saw between the oak trunks a man struggling in the roadway with a black bull whom he held by a twitch lashed to the beast's nose. On the bridge by the inn

stood Risbert's youngster Guy, straddling a curved bough that he used as a hobby-horse, and watching the man and the bull struggling together up the road. Pelleas was still some hundred paces from the inn when the bull, with a great heave of the head, broke away and came tearing down the road with the twitch hanging to his nose. The child on the bridge stood and stared as though terror of the beast had paralysed him.

Pelleas gave a shout, dropped his basket, and ran. He was still many yards away, and the bull close on the child, when he saw a figure in blue flash out from the inn and rush towards the boy. It was the woman Mella, desperately and impulsively brave at the sight of the child's danger. She caught him, lifted him up, and dropped the boy over the bridge into the shallow waters of the brook as the bull hustled down with head lowered. Pelleas saw the blue figure tossed, and flung aside against the wooden side of the bridge.

Dashing through the brook, and paying no heed to the squealings of the boy, Pelleas reached the road just as the bull turned. He had learnt to handle cattle at Roding, and his blood was up over the woman's tossing on the black beast's horns. He did not wait for the bull to charge, but made at him, dodged a heave of the head, and caught the twitch-handle in the air. Dust went up from the tussle between beast and man, but Pelleas's wrath and his great strength served their turn. He twisted the

twitch till the bull's nose dropped blood, and the black brute stood and trembled with dread of this man who was his master.

The drover came running up, and Pelleas left him to hold the bull, while he turned to the woman Mella. She was lying on the bridge, writhing a little, but uttering no sound, and at the sight of her anguish Pelleas was smitten with a great pity. The dishevelled blue figure suddenly changed its meaning for him, and he was bending over her and touching her with his huge brown hands.

Below the bridge in the mud of the brook the boy Guy still splashed and screamed with terror and ill-temper. Mella heard his cries above the fierce clamour of her own pain.

"The child——!"

Pelleas felt that this woman had surprised and shaken him out of his repulsion. There was blood on the blue tunic, the badge of courage and compassion. Pelleas put an arm under her shoulders and knelt, holding her, his head close to hers.

"The boy is safe enough. I will carry you in if you can bear it."

She turned her head and looked slantwise at Pelleas with the shimmer of a sceptical smile.

"Oh, I can bear pain. It has come my way. I am not much hurt; a torn tunic, and a scratch here, and a few bruises. Help me up, and I can walk."

Her white face and her words were at war with one another. Moreover, the fangs of Dame Isa-

beau's hounds had taught Pelleas what it was to suffer pain, and a man is a different creature when he has suffered. Pelleas took Mella in his arms, lifted her with the steady gentleness of great strength, and began to carry her towards the inn.

Their eyes met, and Mella went red suddenly from chin to hair. Her eyes caught a tremor of light. Her mouth twitched and struggled.

"How you hold one," she said.

Pelleas's frank face questioned her.

"Not like most men. It is so different. Such a touch makes a woman feel better. But no doubt—you do not understand that."

Risbert was in the woods, and Malkin his wife came waddling out of the fat stupor of a mid-day sleep to find the mud-sticker's man carrying the "singing woman" in his arms. She stared, expanded the nostrils of her pig's snout, and stood in the doorway with fists on hips.

"Love and our Lady—what next——!"

Pelleas was blunt with her, and not to be hindered.

"You had better pick your boy out of the brook," he said; "the bull would have gored him, but for Mella here."

Malkin, fat and pendulous as a sow, bundled away towards the brook where her boy's wet head appeared amid the hazels. Pelleas, steadying himself with one hand on the rope fastened to the wall, carried Mella up the ladder to the room in the gable and laid her on her bed.

She held his hand a moment, but said nothing, and Pelleas went in search of Blanche, her comrade, thinking that a woman was best cared for by a woman; nor did he choose to call Risbert's wife, whose heavy hand was being used upon her boy.

The bull's horn had given Mella no deep wound, and from that day Pelleas and the "singing woman" became friends. She had shown him the valour and the quick heart of a woman, and Pelleas meditated upon it and was the wiser for his meditations. Good and evil are white and black to the unimagina-tive mind, and the most earnest piety is often blind as to colour. It does not realise that human nature is a patched yet gorgeous garment, with red, green, white, and purple strangely blended.

June was passing, and the mud-sticker had traced the patterns on the new clay walls, packed up his tools, and offered Pelleas further service. But the hay was ripening in the valley fields, and Risbert needed a man for the scythe and women to fork and rake. There had been few sojourners at the inn, yet Mella and Blanche were still in Risbert's service, ready to sing and to make sport for strangers, or to turn out into the hay-fields. Pelleas chose to abide at the inn. It was within three leagues of Birchhanger, and Pelleas thought of Birchhanger very often. There was an uprush of red pride in these thoughts of his, despite his striving after humility. Memory was like a thorn in his shoe. It irked him, kept him uneasy. In his world of

visions he saw the girl on the white palfrey riding by and looking unconcernedly over his head. At least, that was the way she passed Pelleas in his thoughts, and he had a strange and resentful desire to make her look down at him and remember that he lived.

Now Pelleas was like a boy nutting in a wood, near grim happenings, yet without knowing it, and seeing little but green leaves. He earned food and lodging in this whispering, shadowy place, where nothing new seemed to happen. Wind waved the grass in the narrow, woodland fields. The sun rose golden behind trees, and sank in red and gold beyond more trees. Folk laboured, ate, drank, and slept, quarrelled a little, gossiped a little, and made no great boast of life. Once a priest came that way, and they knelt and confessed, one by one, all save Pelleas, who was in the barn fitting a new handle to a scythe. The woman Blanche appeared to have brought some swelling, bubbling piece of fun from her talk with the good man in a corner of the guest-room. She whispered it to Mella, who for some reason caught her bosom and looked sad.

It was a cold, grey day in June, one of those summer days when love seems to have died out of the eyes of life, and the world shivers in disillusionment. Pelleas had been out in the forest gathering dead wood and binding it into bundles for Risbert to fetch home with his wood-cart. Coming back in the evening light with a bundle of oak boughs on

his shoulder, Pelleas saw a stranger standing in the doorway of the inn, and filling it from jamb to jamb.

The man's bulk, and the smooth, mouse colour of his surcoat were the first facts that caught Pelleas's eye. It was the bulk of much fat overlying a huge frame, swelling thighs, calves, and neck into gross outlines, and making the paunch a thing that seemed to hang in the downward curve of the girdle. The man's feet looked as though they would crush the flagstone at the threshold into the solid earth.

As Pelleas approached the inn a face appeared somewhere in the dusk behind the stranger's shoulder, made a sound, and vanished. The man gave a heavy jerk of the head, but did not move from the doorway. His eyes were fixed on Pelleas with a steady and impenetrable stare, following him as he came under the oak boughs that drooped across the road.

The man's face was cast in the same mould as his body. A great round moon of sallow skin, creased, swollen, yet flattened, it overhung life with an expression of massive silence, expressing nothing, betraying nothing. The prominent eyes were the colour of the grey sky, eyes that would have looked full of a perennial astonishment but for a steady grimness, a watchfulness that threatened. The mouth looked as though it rarely opened save to admit food and drink; an ugly mouth, slow to speak, and very cautious. A huge silence, impassive and ponderous, he stood there in the grey of that sad

June evening, fat hands with thumbs hooked into his girdle, eyes at gaze like the eyes of an Egyptian god in granite.

As Pelleas passed in front of the inn, the man's eyes followed him, though he did not move his head. Two sharp points of light gathered in them momentarily, and then dispersed into staring greyness. Pelleas threw back his head, and looked at the man in turn. Neither spoke, though in their silence there was something of defiance and distrust.

Pelleas had reached the gates of the yard when he heard the man call after him.

"You, there, with the wood. Come here."

The voice sounded smooth and quiet for such a body, a cold voice that chilled and frightened. Pelleas felt a bristling of the hair, and the sudden alertness of one who hears some wild beast moving in a wood. He threw down his bundle, and turned back to the doorway of the inn.

"Did you call?"

The stranger eyed him steadily.

"I did, young man. Tell me your name."

Pelleas stiffened.

"What is it to you?" he asked.

"Nothing," quoth the man; "out with it, for all that."

He spoke as though he had been accustomed to crush answers out of people as a child squeezes a cry out of a roughly handled kitten.

"If it is nothing to you," said Pelleas, "then you

can do without it," and he turned, looked at the stranger over his shoulder, and saw that his face remained sallow and impassive.

As Pelleas rounded the great oak corner post he found the woman Mella standing there, leaning against the wall. She started at sight of Pelleas, and made a quick gesture with her hand, covering her mouth with it for silence. Gliding back along the wall, she looked this way and that, saw the open doorway of the barn, and swooped towards it as noiselessly as a brown owl. Pelleas saw her stand beckoning him to join her.

Mella's face was the face of a woman who was afraid. The nostrils were dilated, the eyes eager and alert. She spoke to Pelleas in a whisper.

"That man—here! I would rather face any bull. Keep out of his sight, if you would be happy."

Even in the dusk of the barn she seemed to be under the influence of great fear; throwing sharp, restless glances through the doorway, and fidgeting with her hands.

"It is Goliath—Master Goliath! What does he want in these parts, the great cask on legs, the huge white toad!"

She looked at Pelleas as though he would understand.

"What! You do not know?"

He shook his head, and she peered out cautiously, and turned to him again.

"Do not go near him. Keep out of his way as

though you were a dog whose ribs he would break with his foot. I travel the roads—and I know. Listen—I will tell you what he is.”

She looked out again into the dusk, and began to speak hurriedly, half fiercely, yet in a whisper. In the stable opposite they could hear horses munching corn. The inn was dark and silent. Bats were wheeling in flickering circles through the twilight. As for Pelleas, he was conscious of nothing but Mella's intent and frightened face, and of the grim things that she told him.

“God!” he said, when she had finished, “why has no man killed him?”

She jerked her shoulders, and gave a queer cry.

“Goliath! Men shrink away, because of the man's master. He has the devil's eye. And he is such a strong brute, and very cautious.”

Pelleas stood staring and frowning at nothing.

“Why is he here?”

Mella gave another jerk of the shoulders.

“That hound runs before his lord. Keep away, lest he snap at you. He is cruel—for the love of it—like that hell-dog, his master. I would not have him smile at me, for all the gold in the world.”

She glanced out into the dusk, and then slipped away like a cat, leaving Pelleas full of amazement at what she had told him. He trusted Mella ever since he had seen her save the life of Risbert's boy. The woman had a strange, impulsive tenderness under the insolent surface that she showed to

the world. There were two creatures in the body of this "singing woman," the one seen of God, the other seen by necessity and the eyes of coarse men.

Pelleas, as he drew water at the well, and brought in hay for the horses, noticed that the inn was curiously silent. There was no light burning in the gable window, and no chattering under the thatch. The folk in the kitchen ate their supper in silence, Risbert gliding to and fro between the kitchen and the guest-room where the man Goliath sat alone at the end of the long table.

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XIII

Goliath Watches Joan of the Tower

IN the greyness before the dawn Pelleas woke on his bed of straw in the barn, and heard men's voices in the stable yard. Risbert's servile and anxious whine mingled with the stamping of a horse and the snorting of the beast as it waited in the grey silence of the summer morning. A few birds piped in the woods, and the cock who ruled the stable yard answered the cock whose kingdom lay beyond the wood-stack and the pig-pound. Pelleas left the straw, crawled to the wall, and found a chink between the hinge-post and the door. Right before him he saw the man Goliath, huge and grey on a grey horse, with Risbert standing by his stirrup. Pelleas saw Goliath lean forward, cuff Risbert across the face, flap his bridle, and ride out towards the gate. Risbert stood staring after him, wiping blood from his nose with the back of a hand, his lips moving with a grotesque, dumb fury, uttering curses that dared not develop into sounds.

So Goliath rode out in the grey hush of the dawn, and jogged away between the oak trees along a path that led through the Forest. The sun and Goliath met each other on the brow of a low hill, and the man drew up by an old yew, and looked eastwards

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under his hand. Many miles of country lay before him under the level rays of the sun, and Goliath's eyes sought and found a distant hill whose edge was all golden against the glow of the dawn.

Three leagues away in the upper room of a tower, an old man was bending over a clay still and asking someone to gather him certain herbs. His feet were in worn-out slippers, and his tunic was nothing more than a length of coarse brown cloth tied round the middle with a yard of rope. As he bent over the still he thrust his lower lip forward so that it curved upwards to meet the tip of a thin and inquisitive nose. The old man looked frail and dry and part of the rubbish that reposed everywhere amid dust and cobwebs. A brazier had burnt itself out by the window, and under the still stood a small lamp that licked the bottom of the clay with a weak blue flame. The flame and the old man's eyes were identical in colour, and his beard was a little silver peak like the horn of a new moon.

Youth departed from amid the wise rubbish in Age's parlour, Youth in crimson and green, with bow and quiver at back, and a rush basket dangling from the hook of a brown-white hand.

"Fetch me king-cup leaves, green moss from the oak boles, and the root of a dock."

These were the things that Age had desired of Youth, green pulp to be put into stone bottles, pounded in mortars, and heated over coals of fire.

Joan of Birchhanger went down to the marshy

places in the valley where the king-cups grew with their shining green leaves. She had to wade for them, taking off shoes and hose, and seeing the ooze come bubbling between her white toes, and above her ankles. Clean water and some handfuls of grass were next sought for. As for that common but persevering weed—the dock—Joan knew that it abounded behind the stone barn. The quest of the green moss that grew upon oak roots and the base of the ancient stems took her further afield across the valley and into the woods beyond.

Here Goliath had waited, stroking the roll of fat under his chin, and watching the figure in crimson and green coming through the long grass like a moving flower. The luck was with Goliath that morning, bringing the girl whom he had ridden to see straight to where he waited. No man need have doubted that this was Joan of Birchhanger, she who had set the young men quarrelling at Roymer three years ago.

Goliath turned his horse and rode back softly, hidden by the trees. He lumbered out of the saddle, tied his horse to an oak, and waited awhile, staring and stroking his chin. Soon a figure in crimson and green flickered among the tree boles, and a girl's voice began to sing. She had not seen Goliath, and Goliath followed her, walking daintily despite his vastness, and dogging Joan from tree to tree.

She put her basket down, stooped, and began to scrape moss from the grotesque and upstanding roots

of an oak, using the blade of a little knife, and still singing to herself disjointed and irresponsible fragments of song. Goliath leant against a trunk and watched her, a gross man with gross eyes. Her stooping and reaching for the moss brought out the lines of her young figure, and flushed her face for Goliath to see and judge. The man considered her with eyes that looked for things that should please him whom he served. The fat, round face under the brown hood—like a tub of lard open and turned upon its side—gleamed with a greasy grin.

"It will serve," he said to himself, "my lord has a good memory."

Joan wandered on, and Goliath followed her, but approbation took him too close to the girl's heels. She heard dead wood snap, and saw Goliath slip back behind a tree. In a flash she had dropped her basket, taken her bow from her back, and bent it for stringing between instep and knee. Goliath peered round and saw an arrow laid to the string. He drew in his head, and waited.

Joan stood watching, bow slightly bent, arrow-point turned towards the ground. The face of the singer had changed to the face of the huntress, sharp, vigilant, and proud. There was the cracking of dead wood, and an arm in a grey sleeve showed, the arm of a man who was stealing away from tree to tree. It was but a momentary glimpse that she had of it, yet the arrow went streaking the sunlight between the boughs and tore the cloth of Goliath's sleeve.

He turned his great head, but did not pause in his retreat towards his horse.

"Spirit," he said, "that's as it should be. A little wildness whets the appetite. My desire, you can handle a bow well, and so—good-day."

He straddled his horse and went off at a canter, dodging the oak boughs that swept close to his head.

Now the folk at the inn had run like rabbits out of their holes when Goliath—the hound—had gone. Risbert, with a swollen face, jeered bitterly at them all, and broke the news that the gentleman would be home again for supper. As for Mella and her comrade they were in great fear of Goliath, and spent some time whispering together, and packing their wallets for the road. Then their decision doubled on another track, and they unpacked their stuff, and went down into the kitchen to hear what Malkin had to say.

The day had cleared, and despite this man Goliath, Risbert had an eye on the weather and his hay. Experience assured him that the weather looked to be in a better temper. He found Pelleas hewing wood and they agreed between them that it would be wise to make a beginning. So Pelleas shouldered a scythe, took a cloth and a stone, and went down to the grass-land to cut sundry swathes before dinner.

The sun came out bravely, and the day turned to glaring heat, with a droning of insects everywhere, and the green woods hanging sleepily upon the hillsides. Pelleas stripped himself to the waist, covered his head with a spray of leaves, and went strid-

ing steadily behind the swing of his scythe. White-headed daisies, sorrel, the last gold of the buttercups fell before him with the swathes of shimmering grass. Now and again the sharp strokes of the stone rubber rang along the shining blade of the scythe.

An hour before noon the boy Guy came carrying Pelleas's dinner, bread and cheese in a cloth, and a flagon of mead, and Pelleas lay down under an oak tree, while the child wandered back, knocking off the heads of the white daisies with a stick that he carried. The mower made his meal, and lay and stared awhile at the blue sky between the branches before he returned to his scythe-swinging in the sun.

Pelleas was mowing with his back towards the inn, so that he did not see the woman Mella cross the brook at the stepping-stones, and skirt the wood that bounded the grass-land on the north. She carried a fork and a hay-rake over her shoulder, and coming within a few feet of Pelleas without his discovering her presence, she stood watching the sweep of the scythe and the play of the muscles in the man's broad back. She seemed to find Pelleas's manhood a goodly thing to look upon, for a kind of pride came into her eyes.

"We are coming to toss and rake."

Pelleas turned a brown face on her with a quick movement of surprise.

"Hallo—I shall soon have enough grass cut for some of you to handle."

They looked at each other with the easy frank-

ness of friends, this run-away monk, and this woman of the roads. Mella was a different creature when she was talking to Pelleas, and looking at his grave, clean face. Whatever he was in the world's scheme, he differed from other men in that he made her hate the tricks of her trade, and hark back to a spirit that had long gone out of her life.

Mella stood her fork in the ground.

"Someone has come to look for Goliath," she said; "I wonder whom we should pity!"

The stone rang along the blade of the scythe as Pelleas sharpened up the edge thereof. He frowned a little, seemingly very intent on striking sparks from the steel.

"Who is it?" he asked.

She began, lazily, to turn the end of a swathe.

"A knight in red, on a black horse, riding in battle harness, with a great helmet on his head. My faith, a queer creature! I had a glimpse of him as he rode into the yard. Risbert ran out, like a dog to lick a bone. The knight had a queer voice, as though he had a pebble in his mouth, and he seemed afraid to dismount."

She turned the hay with leisurely deliberation, her handsome yet coarsened face thoughtful and a little puzzled. Pelleas, glancing up from sharpening his scythe, saw the whole company coming down from the inn, Risbert with scythe on shoulder, young Guy riding on the horse-boy's back, Malkin and Blanche walking side by side.

"They are leaving Goliath's friend alone up yonder," he said.

Mella turned sharply.

"I saw money pass. Risbert has his orders. This Goliath is a very devil."

Pelleas made a false stroke, and the stone struck sparks from the edge of the scythe.

"I have a mind to meddle in this," he said.

Mella's eyes flashed round to him.

"You?"

"Why not?"

"What, meddle with Goliath, and the man whose hound he is?"

Again Pelleas answered her:

"Why not?"

A curious glimmer of pride came into her eyes. But Risbert and the rest were within earshot, and she said no more.

So these woodland folk worked in the hayfield under the June sun, the scythes flashing through the quivering grass, the women tossing and turning the swathes, and young Guy pelting Mella and his mother with grass. Pelleas swung in three strokes to Risbert's two, and cut a broader swathe, and Mella's eyes wandered often towards him, noting his grave and intent face and the way his bare shoulders glistened in the sunlight. She fell a-musing as she plied her rake or tossed the sweet swathes that grew full of fragrance under the sun.

It was Malkin who some time later discovered

that the company of seven had dwindled to six, and that Mella was the one who had disappeared. Malkin, whose soul was in sympathy with her pig's snout, looked at Pelleas suspiciously, and seeing that he was hard at his scythe-swinging, she mopped her forehead, grunted, and went on turning the hay. The woman Blanche put in a word for her comrade when she saw that Mella had left the hay-field.

"The child has a thin skull," she said; "I have known her to be sick with the sun on a dusty road in summer."

Now Mella had gone back to the inn by way of the woods, casting round in a half-circle so as to come at it from the back. She made her way cautiously into the kitchen that was separated from the guest-room by a rough wainscoted wall uncovered by plaster. Mella knew that there was a spy-hole in this wall through which Risbert and his women could see what was happening in the guest-room. Moving noiselessly along the wall she found the spy-hole as a chink between two planks. It was under the shoulder of a great cask that threw its shadow upon the place and hid anyone who crouched there.

A glimpse of the guest-room showed Mella a figure in a red surcoat leaning both hands upon the sill of the window and looking out down the valley where the haymakers were at work. Mella could see nothing but a motionless and rather rigid back, a great, flat-topped helmet, and the scabbard of a

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sword sticking out at an angle. The man at the window appeared to be on the watch.

Mella knelt down and waited, not daring to lean against the wall lest it should creak and betray her. She kept her ears open for any sound that should warn her of the return of any of the folk from the hayfield. Her knees were stiff with kneeling before something put her upon the alert, the sound of horse's hoofs coming at a trot. The ringing thud of hoofs came nearer and nearer and stopped before the inn. She heard a voice call from the guest-room, and it was Goliath's voice that answered.

It appeared that he threw his horse's bridle over the post by the inn door, for Mella heard his steps come straight into the guest-room. She put her eye to the chink and saw Goliath's bulk go by within a yard of her. The weight of his body made the wall creak and quiver.

"Lording—your servant."

He made an obeisance that seemed to carry the swelling of a rich, fat spirit of mockery. The figure had turned from the window, with a sharp and impatient swing of the body.

"Let us have no froth, my friend. This iron cowl—curse it! I should like a breath of air. Wait—is all safe here?"

Goliath flung leather gloves on the table. He turned and walked to the door that led into the kitchen, opened it, and looked round. Mella, with body and limbs rigid, crouched down behind the cask.

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"Empty. They are all down yonder, making hay."

He closed the door, blew a long breath as though he were hot, and went to pour out wine from a beaker on the table.

Mella saw this, and more than this. The knight in the red surcoat was trying to untie the laces of the helmet and was pulling them into knots.

"Curse these strings!"

Goliath moved across and disentangled the knots. He lifted the great helmet, and gave an almost inaudible yet congratulatory laugh. For it was a woman who shook free a head of reddish hair, and stretched her neck with an air of relief.

"Man's gear—on a woman's shoulders."

Goliath bent forward suddenly and kissed her mouth. The woman drew back, stared, lifted a hand, and then dropped it.

"Enough of that! I am in no temper for that."

Goliath went back step by step, still looking at her, and holding the helmet.

"I guessed at the voice," he said; "as you please; I am the man to-day, not the master."

The woman spread out her hair with her hands.

"Lord!" she said; "the stuff came down and half choked me as I was riding. Give me a horn of that wine. Good. My blood always ran to heat. Now, what news of Dom John?"

They went to the window and stood there, looking out, and began to speak in low, intimate voices, so

low that Mella could catch but little of what they said. The woman appeared impatient and resentful, compelling herself to listen to news that brought bitterness and disgust. She took a leash of her red hair and wound and unwound it about her wrist. One knee fidgeted against the edge of the window-bench. Sometimes she drew herself up, took deep breaths, and glanced at Goliath with eyes that were treacherously thoughtful.

Their talk together by the window covered less than half an hour, and Goliath was the first to move. He leant forward with his hands spread on the window-sill, the rolls of fat smoothed out of his great neck.

"They are coming back," he said; "we had better ring down the curfew on that red head of yours."

The woman remained motionless a moment, her eyes falling into a stare. Suddenly she roused herself, yet with an effort.

"Well, bring it me. I have borne it—and many things—for your master. How many days?"

Goliath brought the helmet.

"It may be seven. I tell you he is like a mad wolf, all slaver and fangs."

The woman rolled up her hair, knotted it, and took the helmet from Goliath.

"Bah!—am I afraid?" she said. "When he has picked the bones of that whippet yonder he will come back to stronger flesh. I know my lord Dom John. I have my ways with him. Fetch me my horse."

Mella heard no more, for she was up and away, skimming out of the kitchen, across the yard, and away round the barn to the foot-bridge that crossed the brook at the place where they washed the linen. She did not stop till she had reached the woods where the bracken spread in green spaces under the trees.

Pelleas, left alone in the hayfield, was raking the swathes together, and pitching them into cocks for the night. There was a great stillness over the valley, and as Mella skirted through the wood she heard the clear ring of hoofs on the road. Coming down into the grass-land she saw the Red Knight riding slowly away along the avenue of oak trees, the sunlight splashing on the helmet and on the steel bosses that ornamented the harness of the horse.

Mella ran towards Pelleas, holding up her skirts through the uncut grass. It was an excited and gleaming face that broke in upon Pelleas's solitude.

"Look—yonder—what do you see?"

She touched his bare arm, and pointed towards the road, and Pelleas, still holding a mass of hay on the prongs of his fork, followed the pointing of her hand.

"A knight in red—on a black horse," he said.

"Goliath's friend."

"Ah——"

"A man—eh?"

"What else?"

Her eyes glittered between laughter and love.

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"A woman."

Pelleas stared, with a sudden picturing of Joan of Birchhanger.

"A woman! What woman?"

"Madame Isabeau—she of the Red Tower."

XIV

The King's Horn

TOWARDS sunset Pelleas took the hand-bill and an axe from the wood-lodge and went out into the forest to cut himself a cudgel. He chose a young oak, of about twenty years' growth, felled it, stripped the boughs, and cut from the stem a stout round log about five feet in length. Using the bill he shaped this rough log into a grim-looking club, a span thick at one end, and tapered off at the other for a handle. Few men could have made much play with such a weapon, but Pelleas tried it upon a rotten pollard willow by the brook, and one blow toppled the willow into the water.

He hid the club in straw by his bed in the barn, and went into the kitchen to get his supper. And since Risbert's wife left him alone to his meal, and a half-loaf stood on the dresser, Pelleas took possession of the bread against the morrow, and its disappearance was set down to his excessive greed.

"Drat the fellow," said Risbert's wife, "his hay-cutting won't pay for such a hunger."

As for Pelleas, he took the money that his clay-carrying had brought him, and which he had kept in a hole in the barn floor, tied it up in a corner

of his tunic, and set himself to keep watch all that night. The man Goliath appeared to be an early riser, and Pelleas did not intend to lose him in the morning. This huge and silent man with the staring eyes, bulked big in the gateway of an adventure. It seemed to Pelleas that he was not far from brutal deeds, violence, and anger. The wind was sounding far off in the wood, but as yet he had caught only the beginnings of a storm.

About the time that Pelleas was hewing out his club in the forest, the old man who sought for marvels among the pots and crucibles in his tower room at Birchhanger, stood hanging his nose over a brass bowl that steamed on a brazier by the window. The bowl held a red fluid from which bubbles rose and broke into silver vapour. At times this fluid showed a curious play of colours, swimming from red to orange, from orange to green, and again to the colour of blood. The old man had a copper rod in his hand, with which he stirred the fluid in the brazen bowl. He was so intent on this marvellous brew of his that a fat spider came dropping down her thread and alighted on the philosopher's pink circle of bald pate without him noticing the invasion. The spider might have spun a web round the old man, for the only parts of him that moved were the hand that held the stirring rod, and the protruding lower lip that kept thrusting itself forward under the sharp nose.

A pony came up the hill among the birches, and

entered the courtyard, but Sir Simeon did not hear it, being as much above such matters as his namesake of the pillar. The wool of wisdom was in his ears, and he lived in slippers and the oldest of clothes. Years ago this gentle, sagacious, peering pantaloon had carried arms, and made love to women. He had become curious, prying, pitifully patient in his old age, stewing concoctions of toads' heads, newts, lichen, and rare herbs, poking his nose into credulous queer books, and forgetting to wash himself or to change his linen.

Footsteps ascended the tower stairs, and entered the room in which he worked. Simeon did not move, but kept stirring with the rod and thrusting out that blue and shining lower lip. He did not even notice his own reflection in the red fluid as it ceased to bubble, the reflection of a foolish and inquisitive old man about whose brain spiders had spun webs.

Youth is apt to be impatient with age, resenting its platitudes, its puling recital of thrice-told tales, the tyranny of its slow thoughts, its readiness to whimper and to cry out against ingratitude. Simeon had no son to take the tiller out of his slack and forgetful hands, no son to bully the thieving reeves to whom "an old fool" was a godsend, and a harvest. It was Joan, the young madame, black-haired and haughty, who kept these rogue servants in some awe, and saw that the proper dues were rendered. Black Joan had sharp eyes and a keen wit. That adorable voice of hers went with a strong, capable

common-sense, and an absolute hatred of soft and flowery things. She loved a hawk with a fierce beak and talons that were strong to tear. The yapping and snuffing of a lap-dog sounded contemptible in her ears.

Now Joan came into her father's room that evening with the intent and watchful face of one who had heard a threat shouted up at her window at midnight. Restlessness showed in her eyes, a foreshadowing of some danger that had not taken definite shape. The servants had told her how a bullock's horn sealed with a leaden seal had been thrown into the courtyard. A maid, crossing the yard, had seen it come tossing over the wall, but no one had seen the thrower, and the thing was a thing of mystery. The horn had been taken to Sir Simeon, and Sir Simeon had forgotten all about it directly lame Ivo the porter had shut the door and left him alone.

Joan had heard the tale from Ivo, and come straight to her father's room. Her love for the old man had some of the pitying tenderness of a woman for a weak-witted child. Its vagaries had to be guarded against, its absurdities borne with, its inclinations kept from tumbling it into the fire, or the mill-pond. Many things roused Joan's impatience, but her father was not one of them. His childishness, the questioning expression of his short-sighted eyes, even his blunderings and his omissions, were part of her love for him, and made her realise that he was a thing to be protected.

Joan stood a moment by the door, and watched her father bending over the brazier. He was utterly absorbed in watching and stirring the fluid in the bowl. If bad news had come he had not been disturbed by it. She closed the door gently.

"I have come up because of what Ivo has told me."

Sir Simeon held up his rod, and continued to gaze into the bowl. Joan knew the mood, and that her father would thank her for being ignored. She glanced round the room with its litter of grotesque rubbish, bundles of dried herbs hanging from smoke-blackened rafters, books piled anyhow in corners, and left open upon the floor. She had smiled to herself over the thought that her father must have boiled up something of everything that came within reach of man. His experimental curiosity had ranged from old shoe-leather to the stomach pellets of owls.

Her eyes searched the place for that mysterious horn that had been thrown by an unknown hand into the courtyard. Ivo had told her that he had left it on the oak chest behind the door, and it was there that Joan found it, evidently untouched. The incident had passed across her father's mind, ruffled his consciousness for a moment, and then left it as placid and unremembering as the surface of a pool.

The mouth of the horn was sealed with lead. Joan's girdle knife served to open it, and coiled within she found a roll of parchment bound with a strand of red leather. The parchment crackled as

she unrolled it, as a dead leaf crackles when pulled apart by the fingers of a child. Joan had been taught to read and write, and the words that were written upon the parchment were few and easy to read.

She stood there in her colours of crimson and green, staring first at the parchment in her hands and then at the old man her father bending over the brazen bowl. She could see the edge of the fluid within the bowl, and the stuff had the colour of blood. Joan's eyes were full of a swimming gloom. They were eyes that feared, and questioned, and foresaw. Flashes of understanding passed swiftly across them, as half-forgotten incidents, suddenly remembered, pieced themselves together about the words of that letter.

She remained staring at the open window whose stone frame with its centre pillar cut two panels of rose and gold from the western sky. What to do? That was the question that flew to and fro like a bat across the window. It was part of the girl's nature that she could think and act with the swiftness of one bred in the wilds, whose eyes were quick to see the deer amid the fern, and whose hands made no fumbling over the stringing of an arrow.

She crossed the room suddenly to her father, put her hand upon his shoulder, and held the letter between his eyes and the brass bowl.

"Read."

Her voice was sharp and tense as the burr of a bow-string. Sir Simeon's eyelids quivered. He glanced

vacantly at Joan with the confused and puzzled air of a man shaken abruptly out of sleep.

"Read."

Sir Simeon groped in a pocket for horn-rimmed glasses, fumbled with them, wrinkling up the skin about the corners of his eyes.

"Your hand shakes, child. What is it?"

She stiffened herself, drawing a deep breath, and holding it behind compressed lips.

There was absolute silence in the room, the silence of a placid and secluded place whose shadowy recesses were made more dim by a level band of sunlight that streamed in through the window. The ray cut the level of Joan's bosom and played upon the white parchment and Sir Simeon's puzzled face. These two figures, set in the thick of all that strange mess of wisdom, seemed to draw closer to each other in the presence of some invisible evil. Wisps of silver vapour still rose from the brass bowl, and turned to a greyish blue in the shadows above the yellow rays of the sun.

Joan put her arm across her father's shoulders.

"It is a trick," she said, "or some piece of malice."

Sir Simeon's eyes behind the horn-rimmed pebbles glazed into a stare. He began to tremble, with quick flutterings of the breath. His lower lip drooped and quivered. Suddenly a spasm of laughter took him, laughter that was both terrible and absurd.

Joan's arm stiffened upon his shoulders. She

drew the letter away, and her eyes took the temper of steel.

"I could point at those who have plotted this out against us. Many things come into my mind."

"Dear God," said the old man, "would they burn us both at the stake!"

His mouth remained open, a soundless, gaping circle, and his knees shook under him. There was a rush-seated chair close by. Joan reached for it with a foot, drew it towards her, and pushed Sir Simeon into it. She stood aside, looking down at him, the parchment crackling as she crushed it in her hand.

"We must meet these lies," she said; "there are many who should help us."

Sir Simeon sat huddled up and shrunken. The horn-rimmed glasses slipped and fell upon the floor. Joan stooped for them, and turned to find her father weeping the tears of slack and nerveless age.

Her eyes swam with a momentary mist. Then she kissed the old man, turned, and left him huddled in the chair. And lame Ivo, putting an hour to profit by pulling the grass from between the courtyard stones, heard her call to him from an upper window.

"Saddle the white horse, and the pony. Bring your bow and a sword. Waste no time."

Her eyes were clear and steady and her face set towards action. There were many in those parts who could help her in this moment of grim need. She would ride out and discover who were her friends.

XV

Joan in Quest of Friends

MALORAN of the Black Bec walked to his outer gate with Joan of Birchhanger. He was a lean, white, sinuous man, with long, gesticulating fingers, and a sidelong smile.

By the light of the torch that burnt at the gate he looked sinister and cunning.

"I must crave your patience in judging me," he said, when he had shown her the smooth cleverness of a man who was both selfish, and a coward.

Joan answered him nothing. Ten rough miles ridden between sunset and moonrise for the sake of discovering that this man had cold blood and a hypocritical tongue! Maloran had disgusted her. It had been so easy for her to see that he would not risk a finger-tip for neighbours who were in peril. She would have hated him less had he blurted the truth, and not dropped lies that were smeared with oil.

He waved insinuating, false, propitiatory hands.

"Let us not quarrel," he said, "because I have told you that a man serves his own folk first. Shelter here for the night——"

She looked Maloran straight in the eyes, wonder-

ing at the ease with which he showed himself a coward. And yet this man was held honourable in arms, and had brought a great name with him from Château Gaillard and the South.

"Thanks," she said curtly; "one does not quarrel with a friend who is afraid. Death drives, messire, and words do not help us. Good-night."

She swept over the bridge to the road where Ivo stood holding the white horse and the pony.

"Mount," she said to him, and heard the gate clang behind her back.

They trotted down hill in silence; Ivo asking himself questions that he could not answer; Joan, bleak-faced with bitter scorn. Behind them the full moon hung tangled in a knot of pines. The turrets and high gables of Maloran's house stood black against the shimmer of the night.

Presently they came to the parting of the ways. Ivo drew in. His bluff beard and snub nose were outlined against the moon.

"Which way, madame?"

The moonlight flickered in her eyes as she turned.

"Rushlake. Sir Hilary may be there."

"He was hawking a week ago."

"Good. Tired, Ivo?"

The man laughed.

"I will sing to your tune, madame," he said.

They breasted the moor and saw the strange, tumultuous magic of the Great Wold drifting into the vague distances of the night. The summer

woods in the valleys were like a rolling sea carved out of ebony and dusted with silver. Hill rose beyond hill, each more dim and misty and alluring. A great silence held. No wind rustled in the heather.

It was near midnight when they came to Rushlake, that great brown-timbered manor lying behind its moat and palisades. The bridge was up, the chains drawn, the windows black against the moon. They drew in on the edge of the moat, and Ivo blew a blast on his horn. He blew thrice before a shutter opened under the eaves of the gate-house. A face showed, like a bladder of lard hanging in a dark cupboard.

"Who's there?"

Question met question.

"Is Sir Hilary with you?"

The man at the window leant over the sill and growled a denial.

"No, not he. What's your business?"

"That is no concern of servants. Where could I find your master?"

"Find him? God answer that question! It is no concern of servants."

The white face bobbed in, and the shutter was slammed, leaving Joan staring at the cynical black bulk of the sleeping house. Another hope had been cut away from her, and the baying of the dog seemed to mock her bitterness.

Ivo slouched in the saddle, looking at her with sturdy concern.

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"Shall I shoot an arrow at the shutter?"

"No. Let the fool's insolence pass. We will try Gorse Abbey."

"Five more leagues to-night, madame? You will over-ride yourself."

"When I am tired, Ivo, I will tell you that I am beaten."

The summer dawn was coming up when they saw the bell tower of Gorse Abbey rising dimly in the thick of a grey mist. A bell smote a few strokes as they forded the stream below the abbey mill. It was a heavy dawn, white and sluggish, with no canopied clouds gorgeously coffered in crimson and gold. The sound of the bell fell heavily to earth, and there was no sparkle in the dew-wet grass.

Joan and her man rode to the stranger's gate, and a sleepy porter let them in. The guest-chamber was dark and cold, and empty save for an old pilgrim who was still snoring on a bed of straw. Joan sat down in the window seat, hearing that Abbot Boniface was at lauds. A cowled monk came in, and through the door with him poured the dawn chant of the brethren in the chapel. He stood before Joan with his head bowed and his hands hidden in the folded sleeves of his habit. Joan told him that her need was urgent.

The mists were rolling up when she found herself in the Abbot's parlour. She had drunk a cup of wine in the guest room, and eaten some bread and fruit, and she was alone in the long, low room whose

windows opened upon a garden. The domes of fruit trees glistened above the mist. Sunlight and rolling vapour were struggling together above the distant woods. The green of the grass and the blue of the sky were still thin and without richness.

A poignant thrill went through her as she stood at the window, and caught the smell of roses. Her eyes felt dry and brittle now that the day had come, and in her heart hung eagerness threaded upon fear. There was no one beyond this Abbot Boniface to stand as a helper in her need. Simeon of Birch-hanger had outlived old friends, and solitude is not given to the gathering of affection. Joan saw in Boniface the last human shape between her and disaster. She had some cause to think of aid from him, for her father's father had given a manor at the endowing of Gorse Abbey.

The door opened and a little man appeared. His cowl was turned back from a brisk, sparrow-shaped head. Everything about him was trim and orderly, clothes, tonsure, chin, the folded pink-nailed hands. His walk was a level, placid glide. The dignity he carried was the dignity of grave, satisfied, circumspect routine. There was something of the housewife about him, a shrewdness, a sharp, bargaining gleam in the eyes.

To appear impetuous before such a man as Boniface, to show passion or fire, meant awakening the distrust of a cold and narrow nature. Joan's heart

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had been hurrying in her all the night. Her fierce necessity drove her to speak eagerly to this man.

Her words fell upon a cautious, placid intelligence. Boniface asked her to show him the mysterious parchment that had been thrown by some unknown hand into the courtyard at Birchhanger.

Joan took the crumpled thing from her bosom, and gave it into his hands. He sat in his chair, and read it, moving never a muscle, and considering it as he read, a cautious man who had no desire to commit himself to rash promises. Joan watched him, biting her lower lip. The man's face showed no emotion, not even a glimmer of surprise. Words that had filled her with a feverish dread left his eyes cold, and his face the colour of the parchment. Joan's hot heart cried out at his slowness.

Presently he looked up at her under cautious brows.

"This is a grave matter. What do you ask of me?"

She answered with frank astonishment.

"Help."

Boniface smoothed the parchment on his knee. His eyes appeared to look along the bridge of his nose, and the squint was suggestive.

"What help would you have us give you?"

Joan's eyes darted a flash at him. To her the question was brutally stupid.

"We must disprove these lies. They will drive us to the judgment of arms."

She found Boniface's eyes studying her half furtively.

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"Yes," he said.

"We are innocent of this charge. That poor old man—my father—a sorcerer, a servant of the devil! It is monstrous, absurd! We of Birch-hanger have been good friends to this abbey. You have your knights——"

Boniface rubbed the tips of his fingers together, and nodded.

"Ah, to be sure. You would have us appoint you a champion?"

"Some man who is not afraid to fight against a lie."

Boniface remained with his sharp, clean-shaven chin resting in the hollow of his hand. Joan watched him, to be struck by the reticent shrewdness in the man's eyes. The expression upon his face, the cautious, unmoved pose of his body, startled her. It crossed her consciousness in a flash that it was possible for this man to believe that she and her father were guilty of devil's magic and enchantment.

"My lord Abbot," she said, "when I have spoken the truth—I have spoken."

Boniface's eyes avoided hers. It was not a question of belief with him, for here there was danger in believing. The man's worldliness was a knife-edge upon which he balanced the values of such an affair as this. Decision had come to him speedily, a drawing back of the hand from a cup that contained poison. Yet Boniface detested a maladroit tongue. He would rather hold out a false promise

than cut with steel to the red heart of the truth. He preferred to see things pleasantly rounded, concluded with polite flourishes, bowed into oblivion with amiable grace.

"It is a grave matter," he said, and looked seriously at his knees; "let me confess, my daughter, that I have heard rumours. But what is rumour? Is it to be accepted?"

"Set rumour against my oath."

"My child, if it could be ended so easily!"

Joan felt her face flush and her hands grow cold. She knew, suddenly, within her heart, that this man would not help her. Like Maloran of the Black Bec, he spoke smoothly and looked at her askance. And yet she asked herself why she should feel so bitter towards them, these men who had not courage enough either to help her or to tell her the blunt truth.

It came to her that she could not plead with this Boniface the Abbot. Her pride turned from the thought of it, as from physical shame.

"My lord," she said, "do not vex yourself. There are some folk to whom we would not stand in debt."

Boniface looked at her sideways, and twisted uneasily in his chair. He saw her gather her cloak round her, and his meaner self told him that she was playing haughtily for pity.

"I promise you that this shall be considered."

She held out her hand for the parchment that still lay upon his knee.

"I do not ask it. The letter."

He gave it her, and prepared to speak. But her eyes repulsed the words that were gathering behind his mouth.

Boniface rose, spread his hands, and bowed her towards the door. The two selves within him were discomfited and glad, and the gladness of the meaner self covered the soreness of its brother—with a blessing.

"Let them serve you with meat and wine before you go."

"Does God fill the mouth when the heart is empty?" she asked him, and left Boniface with downcast and angry eyes.

Pride carried her out of Gorse Abbey and along the homeward road with the summer sun burning upon her face. Ivo rode mum beside her, blinking sleepy eyes, and feeling defeat somewhere in the presence of his mistress. Nor had they ridden far that morning before a great weariness came to Joan, a weariness at the heart, spreading with the swiftness of poison in the blood. Her head drooped as though the sun had wilted her smooth, brown neck. The eyes lost their lustre of haughtiness, and fell into a vague, brooding stare. She no longer felt angry with those who had turned sullen shoulders to her trouble. The fire in her had sunk too low for anger. She was dull and weary, and a little stunned by the night's bafflings, and the collapse of her hopes. She had thought well of the world

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but yesterday, and now there seemed no valour and pity anywhere.

It was an hour after Joan had left the place that Master Goliath rode into Gorse Abbey. An anxious brother found Boniface in the garden, snipping off dead roses with a pair of small shears.

The monk showed a signet ring, and spoke as though afraid of being overheard in hell. The message was swift medicine. Boniface left basket and shears in the garden and went in to speak with Goliath in the abbot's parlour.

"The Saints be thanked," he said to himself, "I had the inward eye to see into this matter. Let some other fool offer to take the lamb out of the wolf's mouth. I mind my own affairs."

So Goliath talked with Boniface in Gorse Abbey, and Pelleas sat in a dry ditch under the shade of a thorn-tree, and within sight of the great gate. He sat there with his club across his knees, watching and waiting for Goliath.

XVI

Goliath at Birchhanger

THERE was silence at Birchhanger, and above the sharp roofs the moon had not yet risen.

In the great hall a single cresset burnt upon the dais wall, and the fire on the round hearth under the louvre sent up a drift of smoke into the murk amid the rafters. The great space was full of shadows, and of silence, and in the lord's chair upon the dais Goliath sat with his naked sword across his knees. He had a cup of wine on the table before him, and beside the wine-cup lay his iron-gaddled gloves, and his shield that he had propped sideways against a carved mazer bowl.

Goliath's figure seemed part of the silence and the shadows of the hall. His face was impassive yet alert, and the light from the cresset played in red streaks upon his helmet. Under the tables and benches, and to and fro along the walls three dogs slunk restlessly, with tails down, fur bristling, and eyes that were afraid. Sometimes they crept near to stare at Goliath, moving their heads from side to side, and flinching if he so much as stretched out his hand for the wine-cup. They would slink away again, and go wandering noiselessly round the hall,

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sniffing at the benches and the floor, and returning to stare at the motionless figure in the chair. The eyes of the man terrified them, and yet drew them with some dumb, brutish power.

A half-burnt log sank into the red heart of the fire, sending up a crackle of sparks. One of the dogs threw up his muzzle, and began to howl.

Goliath reached for the empty cup, and hurled it at the beast. The cup flashed, struck the floor, and clashed along the stones, to rebound from the wall, and roll to and fro awhile before lying still. Brown bodies had gone scampering with a patter of paws. The dogs fled by the open door into the screens, leaving Goliath alone.

He sat erect in the lord's chair, staring at his shield that lay before him propped upon the table. The face of the shield was unpainted, and polished like a steel mirror. In it Goliath could see the reflection of anything that passed behind him. The western wall of the hall, wainscoted with old oak, went up like the wall of a black cliff.

A slow smile spread across the sallow face framed by the mezail of the helmet and the edge of the ringed gorget that was laced so as to cover ears and chin. Goliath's eyes were fixed on the shield. He saw a little shutter slide open noiselessly high in the wall behind him. Something white appeared in the black square of darkness. It was a face peering down at him, a white, featureless surface showing dimly through the smoke that

hung in a haze about the tie-beams and rafters of the roof.

Goliath did not move. His imperturbability was the imperturbability of some great beast waiting for its prey to show itself, and knowing that there was no escape.

Goliath saw the white face disappear, and the shutter slide back into its place. High up behind the oak wall he could hear footsteps going to and fro, making a faint patter like the frightened beating of a heart. To the man's left was a door opening upon the dais, covered by a green curtain embroidered with purple lilies. Goliath watched for any movement of that curtain, knowing that a stairway went from the dais door to the gallery leading to the lord's room in the tower.

As for Joan of Birchhanger, she knew now why Goliath had come, and why he sat there, waiting and on guard, with that reddened sword across his knees. She had tried to aim an arrow at him from the shutter in the wall, but the narrow opening gave her no room, nor could she have shot low enough to touch the man in the great chair. The King's messenger, the King's pimp, the King's bully! Joan knew him. Years ago she had shuddered at Goliath's fat and insolent face when she had seen him at Roymer, bending to speak to the King at one of the royal feasts. She understood now why these creatures of a King had challenged her father as a sorcerer, and a worker of evil.

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The door of Simeon's room stood ajar, a room of solid gloom starred by the diminutive flame of a rush-light. Now and again a sound came from the room, a sound like the snuffling of a child or of a very old man. Joan stood in the gallery and listened, nostrils pinched, lips dry and pale. She had tried to hearten the old man, to put courage into him, but he had whimpered, and hidden his face in her dress. There was something monstrous in her helplessness, and in her father's senile despair. He sat there in the shadow, rocking from side to side, pulling at his weak lip, and snivelling like a child. And yet Joan's compassion had been stirred to the deeps. This poor old doddering man a sorcerer and a wizard! She could see his hands groping, faltering, shaking, and they seemed to touch her heart. All Joan's tenderness went out to her father, drowning the thought of self. For it is thus that compassion comes to us when one whom we love greatly is sick unto death either in mind or in body. Nothing seems grotesque, sordid, or contemptible. Inarticulate tenderness swells in the throat. A wonderful patience makes even rough hands gentle.

Joan went to her father. He was a little man, spare and fragile, and somehow she got him into her arms, and held him so that his head lay upon her shoulder. The manhood had gone out of Simeon. He was a dead leaf that quivered and fled before the breath of the wind. Joan spoke great, tender words to him, a mother's words that came to her she knew not whence.

There was a truckle-bed in the room, and she laid him upon it, smoothing his hands and his face.

"Rest awhile, and sleep," she said; "I shall be near you all the time."

Simeon lay still, sighing and muttering a little with the irrelevant vagueness of one in a fever. Joan stood watching, listening. Presently she went out into the gallery, and stood looking at the black mouth of the stairway like one hesitating at midnight on the edge of a river. For a while she leant against the wall, pressing her forehead to the stones, and trying to think calmly. The man down yonder was like a great beast whose eyes searched her out even in that dark place. And even when thought moved in her it sped round and round, an animal in a cage.

XVII

Pelleas Follows Goliath

PELLEAS had lost sight of Goliath in the wooded country two leagues westwards of Gorse Abbey. The man on the horse had out-distanced the man on foot, which was no shame to Pelleas's legs when Goliath's temper and the broad haunches of his horse were properly considered. Furthermore, Pelleas had been posed and baffled by partings of the ways in solitary places, where not a soul appeared to answer questions or to help him to pick up the track of the rider on the grey horse.

Pelleas was not a man who exclaimed against mischances, and hurled epithets against the sun, moon, and stars. A radiant and glowing obstinacy, the stubborn good temper of the born fighter, would show on his face on such occasions. His forehead puckered a little, and his lower jaw came forward. Strength and vitality seemed to increase in him, so that his limbs moved more quickly, and he took deeper breaths into his body.

He trod on the heels of good fortune that day, though it was late when the familiar outline of a hill trailed itself against the west. Pelleas studied it, shading his eyes with his hand. A minute black

pillar stood out against the evening sky like a finger pointing to heaven. Pelleas swung his club to his shoulder, and strode like a young Colossus. It was Birchhanger tower that rose yonder against the sky line, and his heart gave a leap in him at the thought of being so near the place. The black tower woke many emotions in him. There was the fool's part that he had played there, a memory that made Pelleas flush hotly, and kick himself—in the spirit. He thought of the days that he had spent lying naked in an outhouse. Nor did this second episode flatter his self-love. The humiliation of it had been rendered the more vivid for him by the casual indifference in a young girl's eyes.

Darkness had fallen when Pelleas reached the foot of the hill, and began to climb the steep track that wound through the white trunks of the birches. He had wellnigh forgotten Goliath, not connecting the man with Birchhanger and its people, and not suspecting that this lost adventure of his lay waiting to be re-discovered. Pelleas had noticed that the wizard's window, as he called it, had no redness, but that it was a speck of silver, a mere dot under the great question mark of the night. Furthermore, he was struck by the silence of the place, a silence, not of repose, but of expectancy and unrest.

The gate stood open, showing a faint square of light in the blackness of the wall. There was a slinking to and fro of dark shapes between him and the dim outline of the gateway, shapes that fled as

he approached. They were the dogs that Goliath had driven from the hall.

Pelleas stood in the gateway, listening. Not a sound came from the place, though the windows of the hall showed the inconstant flicker of a fire. The high-pitched roofs, the black tower, and the wall, made the courtyard dark and obscure. The windows of the hall were so many narrow panels, let into, and not lightening, the gloom.

Pelleas was not a man given to panic, and yet he was conscious of an indescribable sense of oppression and dismay. He went in through the gateway, treading cautiously, and looking sharply to right and left. The darkness was so smothering, for the moon had not yet risen, that he felt a desire to thrust it off from him with both hands. Half-way across the court his foot touched something lying on the stones. Pelleas started, and stiffened where he stood. The thing was soft, like a bag of wool or the body of a sheep. He stooped, and felt it, his hand passing over cloth to touch a rounded surface that sent a start of coldness through his fingers. Pelleas found himself fingering a man's chin, a man's by the stubble on it, and the chin was as cold as stone.

He straightened like a sapling that springs erect after a gust of wind has passed. An uncontrollable feeling of repulsion made him edge away, and rub his hand against his clothes. Pelleas had never touched death before, and the stiff, cold flesh sent the shock of a new experience through his brain

He drew hard breaths, looked round him, and became aware of the looming bulk of the tower. He moved towards it, found the steps and mounted them, each step marking two beats of the heart. Pelleas's hand touched the door, and skirted over it for the iron ring of the latch. The ring was there, sure enough, but lashed firmly to something that had been thrust in between the wooden jamb and the stonework of the wall. Pelleas fumbled at it, frowning and perplexed. It was half the blade and the handle of a poniard that he touched, and the iron ring of the latch was lashed to the poniard handle.

Pelleas stroked his chin and considered the mystery. As he glanced to and fro in the darkness a streak of light caught his eye, standing like the polished truncheon of a spear. He descended the steps, went cautiously across the stones, and found himself staring at the door of the hall. It stood ajar, leaving a gap of some three inches between its edge and the door post.

Pelleas moved nearer, and suddenly stood very still. That crack of light showed him Goliath sitting in the great chair on the dais with a naked sword across his knees.

At the sight of that gross, granite-faced monster of a man, Pelleas felt the haunting horror of the place go out of him. He brought the head of his club noiselessly to the ground, and resting both hands upon the handle, stood watching Goliath with steady

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eyes. A swift comprehension of things had flashed into his mind. The grimmer meaning of the lustful tale was beyond him for the moment. But that there was mischief, devil's play, at work here, he guessed full well.

As he stood watching he saw Goliath smile, and turn his head as though he had heard some sound. The man's eyes were away from Pelleas, and towards the green curtain that covered the dais door. For a while nothing happened. Then Pelleas heard a sound like the creaking of hinges. The curtain stirred and bulged, not with a rush of wind, but with the pressing against it of someone's body. It was jerked aside with a rattling of rings along the pole, and Joan of Birchhanger came through on to the dais.

Her eyes swept the hall, and then came to a point upon Goliath who remained motionless in the chair. The girl's face was tense and watchful, lips pressed tight, eyes steady though afraid. Pelleas saw that she had a bow in her hand, and several arrows thrust into her girdle. The curtain fell behind her. She and Goliath looked at each other in silence.

Goliath was the first to speak.

"Madame," he said, "I have waited two hours for your coming."

She stood by the wall, and leant lightly upon her bow. To Pelleas she appeared calm and unflurried, but he did not know that her knees were trembling under her and that she was playing to hide her fear.

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He could not see Goliath's face, only the curves and bumps of a huge cheek bone and jaw.

"Well, madame, let us understand each other. I obey those over me. This charge is in the King's hands."

Joan stared at him with shadowy eyes.

"Speak out, man, and save me riddles."

Goliath laid his right hand on the table so that it was near his shield. He watched Joan as a man watches a snake in the grass.

"Madame, I am the King's servant. I came here at my lord's bidding and swords were drawn against me yonder, in your courtyard. Shall I tell you what you already know? My lord's summons was in your hands. You did not obey it, neither you nor your father. Therefore I am here to take you before the King."

To Pelleas it seemed that the girl flinched a little, and that she shrank nearer to the wall.

"Then the King is here—in these parts?"

She mouthed the words slowly with a kind of whispering cry. Her hand went up, and rested over her heart.

Then Pelleas saw Goliath snatch his shield. There was the burr of a bow string, the leap of an arrow that glanced from Goliath's shield, and stuck quivering in the dais wall above his head.

It all happened so quickly that Pelleas stood there staring at the swift, fierce movements of the two before him, forgetting to act in watching Joan's

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rare handling of her bow. He saw Goliath seize his sword, rise from the chair, and spring down from the dais, covering his face with his shield. An arrow struck him as he lumbered to the floor and bounded back from his ringed mail. Joan had slipped away down the hall so that Pelleas could not see her for the moment. He pulled the door towards him and stood watching the fight, unnoticed by the two whose eyes were on each other. It was cleverness against cunning, beautiful skill against shrewd strength. Goliath, crouching, shield up, hunted the girl this way and that, savagely deliberate, not to be flurried. Joan, alert-eyed, flushed, panting with the peril of it, swung to and fro on quick-gliding feet, arrow on string, waiting her chance to catch the man blundering. Three times she shot, and the three arrows stood in Goliath's shield.

Joan had her last arrow on the string. The heavy trestle table stood between her and Goliath, and both paused—and watched. Goliath uncovered his face and the arrow sprang at him. It had been a feint on the man's part, and Joan's last arrow stood quivering amid its fellows.

Her face was turned towards Pelleas, and he saw a kind of despair rush up into her eyes. Goliath sprang forward, charged straight at the table, and hurled it over as a bull might crash through a hurdle of osier twigs. The table struck Joan's heel as she turned to run, and she faltered under the flash of Goliath's upraised sword. Pelleas stood still and

stared. It was beyond belief that Goliath would strike her.

But strike her he did, even though it was with the flat of the blade. Joan's upraised bow broke at the leather hand-grip. She was down under Goliath's feet, and it seemed to Pelleas that Goliath trampled on her.

His heart gave a great leap in him as he charged into the hall, swinging his club as a blacksmith swings his hammer.

XVIII

The Fight in the Hall

JOAN of Birchhanger lay very still, with one arm flung out, and her face hidden. That was a fact that bulked big in Pelleas's consciousness beside the ponderous reality of Goliath. The debatable distinction between the flat and the edge of a sword did not occur to him. He was possessed by an urgent desire to pound the man, to smash shame into him with a few sweeps of his club.

Goliath wheeled round, like a mill veering to meet a wind. He stood stock-still a moment, staring at Pelleas with a puzzled impatience in his eyes. His forehead ran into wrinkles, the forehead of a man challenged by some memory.

But that swinging club was not a thing to be talked to, and Goliath's face seemed to swell into sinister fury. It lost its obese, smooth gravity, its look of imperturbable and self-assured deliberation.

"Hallo—stand off—there."

He spoke with a quick snapping of the lips, and a thrusting forward of his great head.

"God of the Jews curse you! Who sent you to get your fool's head split by my sword?"

Goliath had learnt to know when a man was dan-

gerous. He had fought men who had flown at him in a frenzy; men with desperate eyes who had struck half-heartedly, and been beaten before they fought. But Pelleas's face made Goliath's sinews draw taut under their sheets of fat. He took deep breaths, thrust out his lower lip, and kept his eyes upon the eyes of Pelleas.

The overturned table lay between them, and close to Goliath's feet Joan, a prone and twisted shape, one arm flung out, her broken bow across her body. Goliath drew away from her, balancing his sword and putting his shield forward. He went a pace nearer to Pelleas, and stared him in the face.

"Well, you young fool——!"

Goliath had cowed many a man in his time by thrusting forward that lower lip of his, and staring straight into an enemy's eyes. Pelleas did not flinch. He held his club poised on his shoulder, his weight resting on one foot, ready to spring back from a sudden sweep of the sword.

Goliath stood back a pace, smiling, the twisted smile of irony.

"Run along with that cudgel of yours. Ah——!"

Pelleas leapt the table, swung a blow, missed, and swerved for very life. The whistle of Goliath's sword went through the air a hand's breadth from Pelleas's thigh. Pelleas sprang away, head up, eyes aglitter. He was aware of a voice in his head telling him that a mail-clad man with a sword was a problem to be tackled with caution.

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Goliath's eyes became more staringly like the eyes of a bull. He held his shield high and came forward step by step, crouching a little, and holding his sword with the blade sloping towards the floor. Pelleas gave ground as Goliath pressed on him. Shrewd wit told him that to strike at this moment would bring Goliath's sword stabbing upwards and ripping his belly. There was that shield to be remembered. It was like a pent-house reared to break the fall of stones and timber.

Pelleas kept his head, and his eyes on Goliath's eyes. He circled round, only to find Goliath playing the pivot. The big man was a grim old bull, who had learnt cunning and the use of his horns. Battles were not won by frenzy, and blind rushes.

Pelleas's wits were working as quickly as his feet. He cast rapid side glances to left and right, but never lost his grip of Goliath's eyes. To break the man's guard, to close in so that steel should not count! An overturned bench lying beyond the long table caught his eyes for a moment. The thing might have winked at him, suggesting what was obvious to a man who had the strength to play with the trunks of young trees. Pelleas set his teeth, and looked hard at Goliath, wondering whether that side glance had betrayed the move that was in his mind.

He turned suddenly and ran towards the dais end of the hall where the bench lay, leaving Goliath crouching under the shelter of his shield. Pelleas

dropped his club, and put his hands to the bench. It was of oak, and a fair weight for two men, but weight was what Pelleas needed.

He heard Goliath roar at him, and come charging up the hall. Pelleas turned, swinging the bench above his head. He saw Goliath blunder to a standstill, raise his shield, and lower his head like a ram meeting the butting pate of a rival. Pelleas hurled the bench broadways at him much as woodmen toss a beam from a timber tug. It struck Goliath on the crown of the helmet and sent him sprawling along the floor.

Pelleas dashed for his club. Goliath, rising on one elbow, stabbed at him, and missed. The good oak came down on the back of Goliath's helmet. He fell forward, shooting out shield and sword, the rings of his gorget striking sharply upon the stones.

Pelleas stood over him with raised club, but Goliath did not move. He lay there on his belly with arms and legs stuck out, like a great grey beetle pinned to a board.

The first thing that struck Pelleas was the sudden silence of the place, an eerie and dismayed silence as though all human sound had fled away and left him alone with death. He touched Goliath with his foot, and then drew away sharply, remembering the cold, stiff thing he had touched in the courtyard. A green shape caught his glance, a white hand and wrist at the end of a wrinkled sleeve. Pelleas drew breath with a sense of abrupt relief. He sprang

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across the overturned table and bent over the girl Joan.

She lay with her body twisted, one cheek pressed against the stones, and her right arm under her bosom. Her hair had slipped from its ribbon, and its black waves hid the cheek that was uppermost. And as Pelleas looked at her, lying so still and silent, a great pity leapt in him, pity such as a monk in a monastery could never have felt or known.

He laid the club aside, knelt down on the stones, and stretched out a hand to touch one of hers. For the moment he was afraid to touch that hand, the memory of the cold stiffness of the dead thing yonder being so terribly fresh upon the surface of his consciousness. He had a dread lest he should find the girl's hand like the flesh of the dead man who lay in the courtyard.

Then he touched her fingers.

They were warm and soft to the touch. Pelleas felt a strange elation go darting up his arm.

For a moment he knelt irresolute, frowning a little, and looking at Joan's hair. He took a loose strand of it and let it slip over his fingers, eyeing it with the air of a man who had discovered something strange and new and beautiful. Then he put a big, brown hand gently under her shoulder and turned her over. Her face rolled slowly into the light of the fire, a white face with black hair falling about it, closed lids, and drooping mouth. Pelleas was perplexed in the thick of swift and wonderful impres-

sions. Goliath had struck her—and yet! He passed a hand over her head, drew it back into the firelight, and found a faint blood smear on one finger.

Then Pelleas behaved queerly.

He sat back on his heels, and laughed.

The laugh died out of his mouth like the self-adulations of a boy caught thieving in an orchard. He sat on his heels, turned his face towards the main door, and listened. Out of the night came the sound of men riding, the ring of hoofs on the hill track under the birch trees.

The light of a purpose conceived, and rising into action, filled Pelleas's eyes. He took Joan in his arms, rose with her, and stood looking up and down the hall. The door leading through the screens to the kitchen and the buttery, stood open. Pelleas made for it, hearing as he went a voice that shouted:

“Goliath—Goliath.”

XIX

Pelleas Carries Joan in his Arms

PELLEAS made his way out of Birchhanger by a gate in the kitchen court. His first glimpse of the open sky showed him the moon rising in full splendour through a mass of flocculent clouds. Pelleas had forgotten the rising of the moon, and he welcomed her with a grave nod as a trusted and opportune friend.

He could hear horses trampling in the main court and men shouting to one another, and laughing. Then silence seemed to snap them up, and Pelleas guessed that they had found Goliath lying on his belly with arms and legs spread out. Pelleas did not tarry to hear what they thought of the matter, but plunged in among the birch trees, and began to descend the hill. The birch wood, sloping towards the south-east, let in the moonlight along its glimmering aisles. The trunks shone white, and the filmy foliage threw no great gout of gloom such as a beech tree throws upon the ground.

Pelleas contented himself with doing one thing well at a time, and he found it work enough to carry the girl safely down the wooded hill. Her movements, and her bow play had given him a sense of

airiness, and lightness upon the wing, but he found her heavy, far heavier than he had thought. Moreover, she lay so limp in his arms that he had to hold her the tighter, and her head kept slipping from his shoulder and showing a long white gleam of throat. Voices had broken out again in Birch-hanger, loud, combative voices that quarrelled like birds in the air. Pelleas had left his club in the hall, and he had nothing but his bare hands with which to challenge the world. Caution, and a sense of sacred endeavour took possession of his mind. He looked southwards across the white valley, and saw the dark reef of the forest covered with a glitter as of spray. Pelleas held on towards it with the instinct of an animal seeking cover.

The great galleries of a beech wood dwindled before him, with a faint grey light under the canopied boughs, and the trunks merging into massive gloom. There was no underwood here; nothing but dead leaves rustling under the feet, and sometimes bracken brushing the knees. A man could go on and on and round and round amid these mighty pillars of the forest, lose the beginning, and find no end.

Pelleas felt an aching of the arms, and a dubious clouding of his conjectures. He laid Joan down at the foot of a tree, stretched his arms and shoulders, and then asked himself bluntly what he meant to do. The question was easily asked, but the answering of it was a different matter. Pelleas rubbed his chin with the palm of his hand, and stared into the

darkness. He bent over Joan, heard her take breath slowly and regularly, but discovered no sign of returning consciousness. What did a man do on such occasions? Experience had never prepared him for such a problem. The adventure-book at Roding had never dealt with an episode in which a girl lay stunned in the thick of a wood, and left all the responsibility to the hero.

The obvious suggested itself, and Pelleas seized on it with grave consent. He must keep the girl concealed, and out of the reach of Goliath and his gentry, till such a time as Nature chose to give her back her wits. Then it would be her affair. She would be able to tell him what she desired to do, and he—Pelleas—would serve her.

This simple compromise with circumstances heartened Pelleas greatly. He began to exult inwardly over his smashing of Goliath, though his exultation was not the exultation of a King David. Pelleas's exultation showed itself as a grim light in the eyes. He may have guessed that in felling Goliath he had smitten at the lord behind Goliath, and at a man's ordering of brutality and lust. Well, so much better the blow. He had not come adventuring to tread on toads and mice.

The obvious accosted him with yet another suggestion. It would be safer if he carried the girl deeper into the forest. Pelleas agreed. He bent over Joan, took her in his arms, and settled her head upon his shoulder. And in the doing of it

Joan's mouth, warm and soft, came against Pelleas's cheek. The touch of her lips sent a shock of emotion through him. He stood still a moment, looking down into her dim white face.

Then he remembered the hard, cold surface she had shown to him that day when he had searched for her in Birchhanger and had come upon her unexpectedly in the court of the falcons. There had been a mute and unprayed-for desire in his heart that he might be given a chance to change that look of contemptuous mistrust. It was a very human desire, far more admirable than officious zeal in chastening the vices of the world at large. Pelleas had surrendered more than he imagined when he threw off the monk's habit, and left grey and austere Roding for the mystery of the wilds. He had trusted himself in Nature's land, Nature—the most powerful of all the saints. She had touched his heart with her finger, stirred the deeper instincts in him, changed the whole tendency of his adventures without Pelleas suspecting what she had done.

That mute, warm, and unconscious touch of Joan's lips was like a strange new sound in the silence of the forest. For the first time Pelleas was keenly and physically alive to the body that he carried in his arms. A queer, momentary panic seized him. He hesitated, and was for putting the girl back upon the beech leaves, the starker prudery of his upbringing dashing like cold water into his face.

Then—he stood holding her, lifted his face to the heavy foliage of the trees, and prayed. It was the simple yet stern prayer of youth grappling life with immense and unquestioning seriousness. Pelleas asked God to show him what he should do. And as though God sent him an answer out of his own heart, Pelleas heard the girl's slow breathing, and felt her warm body lying relaxed within his arms. What shame, danger, or dishonour was there in the bearing of such a burden? Pelleas accepted the appeal, and went on under the beech trees, carrying Joan yet further from Goliath.

Half an hour's tramping brought Pelleas to a broad ride that ran like a silver dyke between the dark knolls of the trees. Horses had passed that way not long ago, for there were fresh hoof marks, black and indented curves bitten into the lighter turf. Pelleas had begun to think of resting for the night. He was carrying a comrade who could neither speak nor give him guidance, and Pelleas's great strength had spent itself generously since cock-crow.

He crossed the ride, pushed on another hundred paces, and came upon a splash of moonlight falling into a little circular clearing. It was like a pearl lying in the hollow of a great black shell. The boughs of the beeches cut a circle from the sky, and beyond the dense shade they cast, hazels grew, making a high hedge. Pelleas pushed through, sheltering Joan's face with his arm so that the hazel twigs should not sting her face. Within the screen of

hazels he found a great shallow bowl lined with sleek, short turf, a place where charcoal burners had stacked their fires many years ago.

Pelleas brushed the dew from the grass with the palm of his hand, and laid Joan down. Her eyes were still closed, her limbs relaxed, her breathing slow and shallow. The moonlight lay upon her face, the serene face of a quiet sleeper. This long stupor of hers began to trouble Pelleas greatly. He took it that three hours had passed since he had carried her out of Birchhanger, and he could not help asking himself whether the girl would ever waken.

The scheming, kindly, compassionate part of him woke to action. He split boughs from the hazels and set about building a forest shelter. When he had made a thatch of branches by thrusting the stems into the earth, and twisting the tops together, he gathered dead beech leaves in the hollow of his brown smock, and spread them in the shelter. Then he took Joan and laid her therein, holding her head in the palm of one great hand.

In spite of all the happenings and perplexities of the night, Pelleas realised that he was hungry. He sat down on some leaves in the opening of the shelter, and unslung his wallet from his shoulders. He had taken out bread and a stone bottle of mead 'when a moment's forethought made him pause.

This was the only food he had. And the girl—here? When she woke she would be human enough to be hungry. Pelleas contented himself with one

pull at the bottle, and a modest piece of bread. The bulk of it he put back into the wallet.

His brain felt as clear and wakeful as the moonlit sky overhead. A sense of the mystery of life came to him, and of the queer way things happened in this world outside the walls of an abbey. He sat and listened to the girl's breathing till it became an utterly absorbing sound, dominating his whole consciousness, and stirring vague emotions. The whole forest seemed to breathe with a rhythmical movement that kept time with the rise and fall of the girl's breathing. Sometimes a sigh hung in her throat, and Pelleas could have declared that the beech trees drooped their boughs and uttered a sound like the murmur heard in the hollow of a shell.

There was so suggestive a rhythm about this quiet breathing that Pelleas remembered many a vigil at Roding when he had had to pinch himself to keep awake. He got up and walked to and fro across the clearing, yet so still was the night that he could hear Joan's breathing as he stood under the hazels ten paces from the shelter where she lay.

It was the very stillness that brought another sound to Pelleas's ears, a sound that resembled the fall of water over a distant weir. Coming from the south, a faint yet steady murmur, it made him wonder whether it was the rising of a wind, or whether his ears had caught some new sound out of the night. In a little while he realised that the sound was coming nearer, and growing in volume. It became

more like the rush of water in flood time when a stream foams under overhanging boughs and through half submerged bushes, and struggles with the drift-wood that resists the rush towards the sea.

It had some of the rapidity of a wind, and in contrast to its hoarse haste the tops of the beech trees remained black and motionless against the moon. Pelleas felt the woodland to be smooth and still about him. He pushed through the hazels into the dense darkness under the foliage of the beeches, and stood listening. The sound had lost some of its resemblance to the steady roar of water over a weir, and had become faintly disjointed, as though many minor notes went to the making of this deep, hurrying murmur.

Pelleas was still perplexed, and bristling with vague thoughts of enchantment and midnight marvels, when he saw a point of fire flash out and disappear again into the darkness. It appeared to him like the gleam of a torch far down the black throat of a cavern. The light reappeared, and came and went with rapid flashings and vanishings, a red tongue of fire slanting backwards as though bent by the wind.

Pelleas watched a moment, before he realised that the light was passing up the ride that he had crossed an hour ago with Joan in his arms. The sound as of rushing water had become the thudding spatter of scores of hoofs going at a gallop over soft grass. Pelleas turned and ran towards the ride. He threw himself down under the shadow of a beech tree,

wriggled towards the trunk, and looked out over the heave of a great root.

Between the high black banks of foliage that shut in the ride a burning torch appeared, jerking slightly as the lantern on a mast of a ship jerks in rough weather. Behind that red rent in the forest's gloom came a vague glittering movement, a dragon's rush of something scaly, huge, and strong. The moonlight showed galloping hoofs, and tossing manes, spears slanting, armour agleam, men bending in the saddle, sulky, red-eyed sumpter mules dragged along with noses in the air, lumbering pack-horses, all trampling like a black north wind. The man who carried the torch rode some paces ahead of the main body, like red lust galloping into the night.

But it was the figure following the torch-bearer that caught Pelleas's eyes, the figure of a man in scarlet, bare-headed, burly, rocking clumsily in the saddle. The harness of his horse was covered with bosses of gold, and the saddle was of ivory padded with red leather. As he swept up and by, Pelleas had a glimpse of a broad, dusky, savage face, a face contorted either by anger or by great pain. His teeth showed like the teeth of a snarling dog, and sweat hung on his forehead and on the hairs of his stiff brown beard.

The whole company went by with the speed of a herd of deer, and Pelleas found himself watching the flashing shoes of the hindmost horses as they galloped away after the man with the torch.

XX

Joan Comes to Life

PELLEAS lay awhile with his chin resting on the root of the beech tree, his thoughts following those galloping horses into the night. He asked himself whence these men had come and whither they were going, and why they rode with such savage haste. Nor could he forget the face of the man in scarlet who had galloped by either in anger or great pain. It had looked to Pelleas like the face of some evil, blood-greedy animal hurrying away into the darkness.

He got up and returned towards the clearing, and pushing his way through the hazels, paused abruptly on the edge of the moonlit grass, one arm still holding back the hazel boughs. A queer sound had come to him from the shelter of leaves, a sound that puzzled him for the moment, possibly because it was so natural and so unexpected—the sound of someone yawning.

A smile broke out over Pelleas's face. He crossed the grass, went confidently to the opening of the shelter of boughs, knelt down, and looked in. He appeared to be struck with sudden rigidity, one hand resting on the grass, head thrown back, eyes at gaze.

Hardly two feet from him was Joan's face, white and astonished. They were staring at each other in silence like two stone saints on opposite sides of an altar slab.

The girl caught her breath, and drew back into the shelter.

"Who——?" she began.

Pelleas felt in a great hurry to reassure her, and his words tumbled out like boys from a school-house door.

"I am Pelleas," he said, "the man Dame Isabeau of the Red Tower hunted with her hounds. There is nothing to fear. I carried you out of Birchhanger, and built you a booth here for the night."

Chiefly was he conscious of two eyes staring at him out of the semi-darkness, eyes that were incredulous, mistrustful, and utterly perplexed.

"I do not understand," she retorted.

Pelleas began to explain.

"I am telling you that I am the man whom Dame Isabeau befooled, and whom you saved——"

He swallowed a moment's confusion, and galloped on.

"The hounds had torn me, you remember. And you took me on the back of a horse to Birchhanger, and had me nursed there seven days."

Joan remembered it, but her recollection carried her beyond those later incidents to Pelleas's mad attack on her in the tower. She continued to look at him with shadowy and mistrustful eyes, like a

wild bird in a cage, half fierce, and half afraid. Yet Pelleas's earnestness showed on his moonlit face. He spoke gently, with the air of a man who had a very sure grip of himself. A certain note of appeal in his voice struck her. She glanced aside, and then looked at him again with a quick kindling of her consciousness.

"Yes—I remember that. But how did I come here?"

"I have been telling you."

"Have you?"

"I carried you out of Birchhanger, and down the hill—into the forest."

Her face still conveyed to him a sense of dark-eyed and troubled astonishment.

"Things happened such a little while ago," he said; "you must remember!"

She put her hand to her head, and her mind seemed to grope for something, to touch the truth, and then to lose it again in a fog of forgetfulness. Pelleas knelt watching her, trying to efface himself and to hold his breath lest any movement of his might disturb the searchings of her reawakened consciousness. An understanding of what had happened to her had come to him with the recollection of a certain mishap at Roding. A monk named Dominic, who was a good carpenter, had been up a ladder mending one of the shutters in a dormitory window, and had fallen, and struck his head upon the stones of a path. Dominic had forgotten the

shutter-mending when his consciousness had returned. He had asked those about him whether matins had been rung for; and between matins and his fall from the ladder some ten hours had passed. Pelleas suspected that Goliath's sword had served Joan the same trick.

She sat there staring at him, twisting a strand of her hair about her wrist. Her face was perplexed, troubled. Her lost look moved Pelleas strangely. He felt a burning compassion shining from his eyes towards hers.

"It was Goliath," he said.

"Goliath?"

The echo was no more than an echo.

"A fat man in armour. He was in the hall at Birchhanger, sitting in the great chair. You came out from behind a curtain and shot arrows at him. He caught the arrows on his shield, and struck you with the flat of his sword."

She leant forward slightly, mouth drooping a little, eyes on his, her whole face betraying an effort to grasp what he was telling her. Her eyes threw out a sudden gleam. She held her breath, and stretched out a hand towards Pelleas.

"Goliath!"

Her hands went to her face, and a shiver passed through her. When she uncovered her face again it was sharp, and yearning.

"Tell me—all that happened."

Pelleas told her everything, even his finding the

dead man in the courtyard. She remained motionless, save for a restless clenching and unclenching of the hands.

"Yes, yes; but there was someone else——"

Pelleas met her eyes.

"No."

"An old man."

He shook his head.

"You brought me—from Birchhanger Hall here?"

"Otherwise they would have taken you," he answered her. "There were a dozen of them, to judge by their shouting and the trampling of their horses."

For a moment she knelt white and motionless, and then seemed to droop rather than to fall, bending at the hips, and bowing her head upon her knees. Pelleas stared at her blankly. A sudden sense of sorrow and shame overshadowed him. He wondered what he had done amiss, or what he had left undone. Yet chiefly was he conscious of her bowed head, her silence, and her streaming hair.

She straightened suddenly and shook the hair back from her face.

"It was my father," she said.

And then :

"He was there in the tower. There were lies against him, and the threat of death."

Pelleas could find nothing to say to her.

"We must go back to Birchhanger."

She spoke rapidly, drawing sharp breaths, and ignoring his astonishment.

"Yes—now. Oh, be quick. Where are we? How far?—How long ago?"

She was in a passion for action, eager to let her dread and her desire flow into movement that would bring relief. Pelleas did not answer her for the moment. The very passion of her suspense startled him. Gratitude! Had he expected gratitude? And here were her eyes reproaching him for having battled with Goliath and brought her for safety into the forest. How was he to have guessed that an old man was being left in jeopardy? He had made a blundering business of it, after all, and played the busybody rather than the hero.

Pelleas roused himself, and swept the meaner reflections aside as he would have swept back boughs with a swing of the arm.

"If you return to Birchhanger——"

He made way for her, and she came out of the hazel shelter into the moonlight.

"I can go alone," she said.

Pelleas's face grew dogged, as though she had called him a coward.

"I go, too," he said; "I may do better a second time."

His voice set different emotions vibrating within her. She realised for the first time that she had passed by all that he had dared for her, as one passes a friend in the blindness of anguish or of regret. She lifted her chin sharply, and looked at Pelleas with a look that was intimate, even appeal-

ing. The strangeness and mistrust of these happenings had passed. She felt in her heart that this man with the grave and intense face had come into her life as a solid yet helpful fact.

"What a wretch I have been! Not a word to you—for all that you have done!"

The sudden shining of her eyes opened a new window in Pelleas's soul. It was as though someone had come with a lamp into a place that had been dim and shadowy. He looked at Joan, and was struck by a sheer sense of her wonderfulness as she stood there in the moonlight. She was a new creature to him, gracious, adorable, and mysterious. He had never thought of her as he thought of her that moment.

"I had a debt to repay," he said simply.

The shine of her eyes fell away into the moonlight.

"It was a poor debt, if I remember."

Pelleas knew that had they treated him like a dog at Birchhanger he would now have carried a glow of gratitude in his heart.

Joan looked at the darkness of the woods, and Pelleas saw the suspense rise again into her eyes. He picked up his wallet, and slung it over his shoulders. Joan found him waiting for her, and holding out a piece of bread.

"I saved it for you. Can you walk?"

Her mouth and eyes smiled at him as she took the bread.

"Deo gratias. But how far——?"

"Five miles, perhaps."

"You carried me—all that way?"

"Well, you were heavier than I thought," he answered. "But I would rather have carried you than a sack of corn."

Her eyes flickered a moment, and she asked him if he knew the way that he had come. Pelleas looked dubious. He told her of the ride, and her face brightened.

"I know all the paths for miles," she said.

They pushed through the hazels, Pelleas going first, and holding back the boughs with arms spread. They came under the black vaults of the beech trees and saw the ride—a broad streak of moonlit grass.

Joan glanced to and fro, and Pelleas saw the moonlight in her eyes. Her face was the colour of ivory, her hair like jet.

"Come," she said.

Pelleas's heart leapt like a dog at the leash. They turned northwards together through the moonlight, Pelleas watchful and wide-awake, because they were following in the track of the red torch and the galloping horses. All sense of weariness had gone out of his body. Every fibre of him felt alive that summer night.

XXI

The King in the Forest

UNDER the oak trees about Blud's Well men rubbed the sweat from the horses, and spoke to one another in low, whispering voices.

"The devil's on hot tiles," quoth one, peering at a comrade under the belly of a roan.

A little man, with a clumsy, rolling head made a noise like the buzzing of a blow-fly, and spat into the grass.

"Dear Lord, what a dusting! The saddle part of me is as raw as a round of beef. What do they call this place, eh?"

"Blud's Well."

"I haven't set eyes on any accursed well."

A lout with a red face and the corners of his mouth drawn down jerked a thumb towards a low stone wall that showed grey in the moonlight.

"Yon it is."

"Hum! And who, by Judas the damned, was Blud when he wasn't a-bleeding?"

"A hermit."

"I know them! Dickie, let me be a hermit. Dig a well, wash in it, and make it holy, eh? Then

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have folk bringing ye food and gear, and all the wenches coming to get husbands. I thinks I will be a hermit."

"Tsch! fool, nip your tongue!"

The little man rolled his heavy head in the direction of a red tent that stood under the oak trees on the far side of the glade. A fire burnt some yards from the tent whose red canopy looked like the head of a great moth with the gloom under the trees for its wings. Some fifty paces from it stood a second tent whose white walls showed a light within and a moving shadow playing upon the canvas. Further still, men in harness lay grouped about a fire, their shields slung to the spears that had been set upright in the ground. Most of the men seemed asleep. One sat on a saddle and drank wine out of a silver-rimmed horn.

The moon had swung towards the west, and the mountainous shadows of the oaks covered half the glade with its tents and fires. Towards the north where the oaks came round to meet over a narrow track, a figure went to and fro from the shadows into the moonlight, and back again into the shadows, the figure of a man on guard.

The grooms who were rubbing down the horses glanced at the red tent with furtive curiosity. They saw the flap jerked aside, and a man in scarlet appear, bare-headed, his tunic open at the throat, his right hand holding a switch and the end of a silver chain. A little brown monkey huddled close

to his heels, the silver chain hanging from a leather collar about the monkey's neck.

The grooms turned their backs and bustled at their work.

"John—King John," sang one in a whisper, whistling softly between each word.

A comrade answered round the nose of a grey mare:

"St. Thomas send us no more kicks to-night! Yah, the royal beast!"

The King in Scarlet stared this way and that, moving his head slowly like a wild animal let out of a cage. His face looked swarthy even to blackness against the background of the forest, though now and again there was the white flash of teeth. The monkey that he held by the chain cowered at his heels, gibbering, and hiding behind the folds of the scarlet tunic.

Here was the grimmest of all the Angevins, driven out like a foiled beast into the deeps of the Great Wold! Runnymede, that island amid the waters! The stark faces of men who had come before him with shield and sword! The hand that held the monkey's chain had answered "Yea" to the words of the Great Charter! A King, with kings over him, out-faced, threatened, he had come to prowl and hunt in the wilderness, flinging his fury forth in sweat, and in an orgy of action and of mad, tumultuous physical desire. His men had seen him chew grass, tear the bark from the trees, and crush

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it between his teeth, gallop two horses until they died. These men of his followed him because he was still able to hold them with the spell of fear. An immense and furious energy swept them along as a wind sweeps autumn leaves along the glades of a forest.

The King came into the circle of light spread by the fire, dragging the monkey after him at the end of the chain. The firelight flickered upon his face with its massive cheek bones, stiff beard, and staring eyes. And the play of the firelight gave his head the sinister grotesqueness of the carved head upon a corbel that leans and grimaces as light and shade go changefully over it.

He stood for a while staring at the fire, biting his nails and frowning. The grooms had left the horses and disappeared among the oak trees, and the knights about the second fire seemed asleep, with the exception of the fellow seated astride of the saddle and drinking out of the silver-rimmed horn. Presently he too lay down after staring stupidly at the red figure of the King. They held aloof, all of them, as men hold aloof from a savage dog whose temper no man can foretell.

The restless movement of the fire woke a reflection of restlessness in the heart of the Red King. A glowering uneasiness passed over his face. He threw quick, suspicious glances hither and thither, felt his body with the palm and fingers of one hand, and gripped the hilt of the poniard that he carried

in his girdle. He walked from the fire across the shadows cast by the oaks, and out into the moonlight. As he turned towards the moon his face changed from swarthy gloom to a stark and glaring grey, the whites of the eyes glistening, the teeth showing above the beard. Restlessness and savage impatience were in his blood. He swung round, and began to walk to and fro, the little brown shape at the end of the chain ambling along beside him.

Presently he turned his steps towards the sentinel who crossed and recrossed the northern circuit of the glade. The man watched the approach of the red figure with rapid and uneasy side gleams of the eyes. The King came close to him and stood without speaking, staring at the man as he swung to and fro.

The fellow thrust out a dogged jaw, squared his shoulders, and went on with his pacing as though no such creature as a king were near. He knew his part. The figure in red was best held invisible unless it gave some sign. To cross it, to utter a single word might mean the rousing of a devil.

More than once the man stopped to listen, even going down on hands and knees, and putting his ear close to the ground. The King watched him with those hard, unblinking eyes of his, while the monkey sat with chain dangling, sucking a stone that it had picked up out of the grass. Down the glade the flap of the white tent was drawn momentarily aside, and a figure appeared, remained there

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for a few seconds, and then vanished behind the canvas.

When the Red King spoke to the sentinel his voice was hoarse like the voice of a man who had drunk much wine. The sentinel swung round upon his heels and stood stiff and straight, spear slanting towards the ground, his eyes fixed on the tops of the oak trees.

"What are you?"

"Sire, a Gascon."

There was a long slide of silence.

"Where should Goliath be at this hour?"

"Sire, here."

"Fool, how can you swear to that?"

The man remained silent. John went nearer, and stared in the Gascon's face as though watching for a single twitching of the muscles. He raised an arm sharply and cut the sentinel across the forehead with the switch he carried. The Gascon rocked slightly upon his heels, but betrayed no feeling.

"Good!"

A hand went into an embroidered pouch, drew out something, and threw it on the grass. There was a glint of money in the moonlight, but the Gascon's eyes did not move.

John nodded, turned away, and walked back towards the fire.

He was some yards from it when the monkey, ambling on all fours, darted in towards its lord's feet and made him stumble. A kick sent it rolling

the length of the chain where it squatted, and gibbered. The Red King stooped and stared into the little blinking eyes. The switch rose and fell. The brown thing cowered and uttered a cry.

The chain tightened, wrapped coil on coil about the King's wrist. He flicked the switch, watching the beast with evil curiosity, and drawing it slowly nearer to him as he wound up the chain. There was a second blow, a scuffle, the leap of a brown body, white teeth biting into a bare hand.

John made no sound, but his mouth became an ugly slit above his beard. He let the monkey hang to his hand for a moment before he plucked it off with a jerk of the chain.

His first impulse made him swing the creature out in air, but a second impulse intervened and imposed itself upon the first. John's eyes blazed red in the firelight. He lifted the monkey by the chain, and went and held it over the flames.

The screams, and twistings of the beast seemed to delight his soul, and his whole consciousness appeared to concentrate itself upon the animal's grotesque anguish. A face looked out from the white tent, and some of the knights sat up about the fire. But no one approached the red figure that swung the brown monkey to and fro over the flames.

A further blaze of anger that was more merciful made John dash the beast on the ground, and crush it with his foot. He left it lying there, and returned slowly to the tent.

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It was in the grey of the dawn that Goliath and his men came to Blud's Well, Goliath with deathly face swathed in bandages and eyes set in a dull stare. The flaps of the tents were closed. Goliath rolled out of the saddle and was met by some of the knights who had risen from about the fire.

Goliath's grey face betrayed how matters had sped. They asked him no questions, but looked meaningly in the direction of the red tent.

"You have come in for blows!"

Goliath's eyes grew smaller. His voice came in a harsh, turgid rush.

"A devil's mess! Where is he? In yonder?"

"He may be asleep."

"What colour of mind?"

A knight with a swarthy face gave Goliath a meaning look.

"He has been like a caged leopard waiting for meat. We counted on your bringing back the wench."

Goliath swore.

"What have I got, eh? An old man, dead and stiff as a board! Bah! I have had a trick played on me. What? Let any man ask questions and I will tear the tongue out of his mouth."

A lad in buff and red brought Goliath a cup of wine. He drank it off, and threw the dregs upon the grass. There was a sharp, warning "sst!" from the lad as he took back the cup. The armed men were moving back towards the fire, leaving Goliath alone.

Goliath turned and saw the King standing in the doorway of the tent, watching him. Goliath was still unsteady on his legs, and the white swathings made his face look ghastly. Yet he had strength enough to carry himself with a fat swagger as he approached the King.

"I have come back wearing a wimple, sire. Such a blow as never man gave me in my life before. I shall bide my time to return it."

There was a tinge of insolence in his voice. Goliath was one of the few who had no fear of the King. John's eyes glittered. His face looked grey and sinister in the light of the dawn.

"Great boasting fool!"

"Ah—sire—ah!"

"What have you brought back?"

Goliath fell a-laughing, and swept an arm towards his men who were unsaddling the horses.

"We have brought you your sorcerer. We found the old fool dead in his chair. Fright had ended him, I guess. He came quietly, so quietly, without so much as a struggle."

John's eyes grew dangerous.

"S'dearth, what I have to do with the old book-worm! The wench——?"

Goliath stared him in the face.

"Lost," he said; "but splendour of God, she is worth finding!"

They looked at each other with defiant, watchful eyes. Then John flung aside, threw out an arm as

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though clutching at some invisible shape, and began to pace to and fro under the trees. Goliath loomed beside him, swaying uncertainly in his stride. And they began to quarrel and dispute, snarling at each other like two great beasts, gesticulating, using gross and filthy words.

"Come, now, I tell you I have baited a trap for her. The wench does not know the old man is dead. Bah! Trust some one, even if it be the devil!"

"Raise your voice to me, fat dog! S'death, you have slept in my bed, and drunk my wine."

Goliath swore for his own loyalty.

"Call me a fat dog; I have brought the game straight to your hand! How many knaves and fools have I bullied and smashed for you in my time? I'll not slink and shuffle like the rest of them!"

"Well, well, you great yellow bladder! By the bones of my father, I am ready to say that you lie."

Goliath swung his arms, and snarled.

"Pelt me with all the accursed lies I have told for you. Look here, fool, swaggering, swearing king, I have baited a trap. We shall catch the wild cat. Go in and sleep."

They stopped by the red tent, Goliath with grim eyes in a deathly face. John glanced at him, and moved away, biting at the fingers of his right hand. The first gold beam of the sun came through the oak boughs, striking full on the Red King's back like a bright sword smiting some blasphemer against God.

Goliath noticed it, and blinked his eyes as though perplexed by the coincidence. Then he lurched away, walking unsteadily, still sick and dizzy with the blow that Pelleas had given him.

A woman came out of the white tent and moved to meet Goliath. It was Isabeau of the Red Tower; her eyes questioned him, and betrayed a purpose.

"Better not," he said to her.

She threw back her head.

"I will chance it."

"He is like a balked boar."

"I know that mood. I should know it—eh?"

She looked at Goliath steadily and passed on. Goliath stood to watch. He saw her push back the flap of the red tent and enter.

Goliath might have counted sixty before she reappeared, her tunic torn at the bosom, her mouth bleeding.

XXII

Towards Birchhanger

JOAN of the Tower and Pelleas sighted the King's fires by Blud's Well, and to Joan those wavering red circles were sinister and evil eyes. She knew that she and Pelleas were close upon Blud's Well because of the dead oak beside the track that stood stripped of its bark, and lifted up ghostly limbs into the moonlight. It was at Blud's Well that she and her father had been warned to meet the King and to answer those who had accused them of sorcery and the casting of spells.

Joan took cover under the shadow of a tree, and beckoned warningly to Pelleas. She had told him some part of her tale as they came through the forest.

"The King is yonder," she said; "he has camped by Blud's Well. They are waiting, perhaps, for Goliath."

They were very close to each other, Joan with one hand resting against the trunk of the oak, Pelleas leaning on the stem of a young ash that he had broken on the way. A swift and instinctive trust had grown between them, covering them like the shadow of the tree. They spoke unrestrainedly, and met each other's eyes without fear or guile.

Joan of the Tower

Pelleas heard the troubled and anxious sighing of her breath.

"If Goliath is the King's man," he said, "what has the woman of the Red Tower to do with Goliath?"

She watched the distant fires as she answered him.

"The woman hates us. It began years ago. How can you tell that she was in league with Goliath?"

"They were together at the inn."

"The woman and Goliath!"

"She came in harness, riding like a knight. Mella—the singing woman—spied on them and told me."

Joan's eyes questioned his. He had to explain Mella to her, and the people at the inn. Their heads and shoulders drew nearer together, and their voices fell into an intimate whispering.

"Isabeau was the King's creature."

"Then what need has she——?"

"She hates us. She was the King's woman."

Pelleas felt Joan shudder. She gave him a quick, appealing glance as though his simplicity were a clumsy touch upon some sensitive scar. That look of hers opened Pelleas's eyes. He bit his lip, stared at the fires, thought for a moment, and understood. He knew now why Goliath had come to Birchhanger, and why the King waited at Blud's Well. It was the King whom he had seen galloping through the forest, that man in scarlet with the hurrying, angry face. He understood, too, why Isabeau had ridden to speak with Goliath at the inn.

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Pelleas felt something harden in him, and with the feeling came a quickening of his heart towards this girl. He saw her as a slim shadow outlined against the bole of the oak tree, a lonely figure that hesitated upon the edge of the darkness. That she should be so brutally desired was to him like a strange wounded cry in the night. Consciousness, the play of light in the eyes, the movement of the hands and lips, had changed her so much for him. He could hardly believe that he had carried her in his arms. Something mystical had arisen in her. It was as though a halo of silvery light played about her body.

And then Pelleas thought of the sallow, billowing fat of Goliath's face, and the hungry red eyes of the King. His heart leapt like a dog at the throat of a wolf.

He was still brooding when he felt Joan touch his arm.

"What is best for us to do?"

The touch stirred Pelleas's blood.

"Birchhanger. They may still be there. I struck Goliath hard enough."

"If we could only trick them, and get my father into the woods. Yet he is so weak, and so old——"

Pelleas was ready for other burdens.

"I have a broadish back," he said; "but where should you go?"

Joan considered a moment, and then spoke of the deeps of the Great Wold, of the outlaws who ranged there, of the hermitages, the secret places. And so

they stood close together in the darkness, contriving, whispering, meeting each other's eyes, breathing in an enchanted air of trust, adventure, and devotion.

"Well, then, to Birchhanger. We must skirt the glade and keep to the trees. I can strike the path again presently."

She held out a hand for his with a swift impulse towards comradeship and gratitude.

"If I were alone—if I had no one to help me! I tried friends, and found them cowards."

Pelleas held her fingers firmly in his.

"A queer world, this," he said, smiling in the darkness, "that first time I came to Birchhanger! What a brute and a fool!"

The dawn was in the east when the two reached the valley below Birchhanger Hill and saw the black tower rising against a pearly sky. Joan had led Pelleas by a way that ran more towards the west than did the track to Blud's Well, so that they had seen nothing of Goliath riding with bandaged head and bloodless face to join the King. Nor did Joan suspect that Sir Simeon was dead, and his body lashed on the back of a horse in Goliath's company.

They stood under the outer fringes of the forest, and looked at the hill dappled and streaked with the green cumuli and white stems of the birches. Pelleas's eyes turned to the girl's face. He had unslung his wallet with the food he had denied himself over-night for her sake. It was quite plain to Pelleas what he had to do.

"There is food here," he said, speaking as though he had planned everything; "you can rest here and make a meal while I go up to Birchhanger and see how matters stand."

"What if Goliath's men are there?"

"I shall go carefully. See, by keeping to these thickets a man can get close to the hill without showing himself. Then one can crawl up among the birches."

He pointed out the way, and her eyes followed his hand. Her faith in Pelleas had grown greatly. Then a thought struck her.

"You must share the food with me."

She sat down under a tree with the wallet in her lap, and Pelleas watched her hands and the sweep of her lashes. He was ready to deny nature, to lie and protest that he was not hungry.

"I had my share last night," he said.

She glanced up at him with just a glimmer of amusement in her tired eyes.

"Your share must have been nothing. This bottle is nearly full, and the bread——"

"I had what I wanted."

She gave him one of those flashes of impatience that were part of her nature. Moreover, she was jaded, and cruelly anxious.

"How does your starving help us?"

Her eyes softened as quickly when he came and stood by her and held out a hand.

"Let it pass," she said; "something has been

dragging and aching in my head for hours. It is so easy to be shrewish when one is tired and out of temper."

She gave Pelleas the larger part of the bread, and they ate in silence, watching Birchhanger Hill and the valley before them. Pelleas's eyes wandered constantly towards Joan. She sat with her elbows on her knees, a piece of bread in one hand, her body sloping forward from the hips.

She turned sharply, and Pelleas looked away.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked him.

Pelleas substituted "nothing" for "you"; the red under his tanned skin deepening.

Joan fell to brooding, and then to thinking aloud.

"If Goliath's men are still there, he will be there also. He must be wondering what has become of me. If there is no chance of a rescue, I shall go back to Birchhanger."

Pelleas lowered the hand that held the bread, and stared at her determined profile. It had never occurred to him that she might surrender herself in order to be with her father. Pelleas's prejudices were all against such a swing of the balance. It was ridiculous to weigh the body of an old man against the body of this girl.

His silence served to convey a sense of antagonism. Joan turned and looked up at him with level brows and firm mouth, and repeated her assertion.

"I shall go back to him. Unless——"

"I bring him here to you."

She nodded.

Then, suddenly, her mood changed again, and she sat with her face between her hands, a frown on her forehead, her eyes staring at the grass.

Pelleas picked up his ash stick.

"I am going," he said.

Joan dropped her hands from her face, and turned towards him so that he saw the indecision in her eyes.

"Wait! Why should you go up to Birchhanger? If the King's men are there——"

Pelleas saw her meaning.

"Well, none the less, I am going."

Her eyes held his, and then fell away towards indecision. Her fingers peeled the green moss and lichen from the trunk of the tree, and for a while she was silent.

"What can I do!" she said at last. "Somehow—I must use you! Is it brutal of me? I am so driven——"

Pelleas took three steps and stood in front of her so that his man's face came before her eyes. It was a grim face, yet wonderful in its way, as a man's face can be in the fine splendour of some great stirring of the heart.

"I am going up to Birchhanger," he said. "When you look at it with my eyes you will see that there is nothing else that I can do."

Joan looked at his eyes, and though she could not see through them she could tell that he had spoken the simple truth.

A rush of emotion swept over her. She sprang up, and with the radiance of the impulse upon her face, went to Pelleas and kissed him.

Then a swift, strange shyness fell upon them both. And Pelleas went out from under the shade of the trees into a flood of light, valour, and exultation.

XXIII

The Lame Man with the White Hair

PELLEAS spent the best part of an hour in crossing the valley and crawling up the hillside through brambles and bracken, with the flickering shadows of the birch trees playing over him, and the white clouds going lazily across the sky. His elaborate caution in climbing that hillside was as whole-hearted as his attacking of Goliath. He accepted himself as a very necessary beast of burden whose life was of supreme value for the moment, and upon whose shoulders rested the hopes and fears of a girl's heart. Half-way up the hillside he heard a rustling in a patch of underwood; the snarling face of a fox peered at him, and a brown shape glided away with a swish of the tail. Higher still in a sunny place he nearly put his hand upon an adder that was asleep on a sandy bank. Pelleas killed the thing with a rap of his ash stick, and crawled on, thinking of Joan.

These thoughts of his were of the simplest, and his thinking more a matter of the heart than of the head. Nor was there any austere and warning voice within him to chill to greyness the generous colour of his impulses. Pelleas was acting as a man with

no guile, no prurient self-consciousness, and no selfishness, might act. Something very wonderful had appeared to him. Something equally wonderful had happened. And the clear, brave beauty of it carried him on in the freshness of the morning. He was living in action, at the very heart of it; spending his strength in doing that which before all else he desired to do.

So—to the top of the hill, where after much scouting, and listening, and writhing along behind bushes, it was borne in upon Pelleas's mind that Birchhanger was deserted. The gate leading into the kitchen court stood open, even as Pelleas had left it when he had carried Joan out in his arms. No smoke rose from the chimney of the kitchen or the louvre of the hall. There was complete silence about the place, save for the passing of the wind through the birch boughs overhead.

Pelleas stood up, looked about him, and made straight for the gate leading into the kitchen yard. A passage led into the main court, showing the gate hanging open and a sunlit stretch of stones and brown tufts of grass. Pelleas passed along the passage and stood listening before he ventured out into the broad, sunlit space. It was silent and deserted; even the dead thing he had touched the night before, had disappeared. He went on towards the hall, and it was in the hall that he found the lame man with the white hair.

The man with the white hair was sitting on a stool

beside the black hearth, telling his beads. His mumbling mouth, the stoop of his shoulders, and the crouching attitude of his whole figure made him appear very pious and inoffensive. He did not seem to have heard Pelleas's footsteps, perhaps because he was so busy with his prayers.

Pelleas let the point of his stick fall on the stones, and the old man looked up sharply and dropped his beads. His white hair stood out like a silver halo, and he showed a round, coy, credulous face, with blue eyes that might have been greatly astonished many years ago, and were still waiting for an explanation.

Pelleas wished him good morning.

The old man returned him his good-will, and stooped to pick up his beads. He had a quiet, rapid, toneless voice that moved like a mouse running across the floor.

A traditional delusion clings to white hair and a mild face. Pelleas saw before him what pretended to be a grey bag of benignity with thin limbs hanging rather weakly therefrom. The old fellow pertained to the Church. And his air of the parish priest brought to Pelleas's mind the bitter things that the regulars of Roding had had to say against the secular clergy. This backward vision of the abbey life flashed across his mind with strange unreality and indistinctness.

So these two regarded each other for some moments, the old man growing more and more uneasy

under Pelleas's eyes, and working his lower jaw and throat like a toad about to spit.

"My good sir," he said, shifting his stool, "there is no fire to share with you. I am alone here in this accursed place. I must confess, too, that I am not strong, and that things frighten me."

Pelleas's broad, brown face lost some of its intensity. He had caught himself wondering whether this old man could be Sir Simeon of Birchhanger dressed up to look the priest. Pelleas had heard of wigs. And the white hair looked over-vigorous and redundant.

"Why do you call this place accursed?" he asked.

"You ask that! Dies iræ, dies iræ! We are beholding again the days of King Stephen. You look a good-tempered young man, not one of these wolves——"

He leant forward and his eyes protruded under the white eyebrows.

Pelleas began to smile.

"This white pigeon!" he said to himself.

The old man shifted his stool vigorously, somewhat like a child on a hobby-horse. A stir of excitement gathered in him. He made quick, deprecating gestures and blinked his eyelids. Then he began to talk very fast, his voice running in one long, monotonous trickle.

"My good friend, it does me good to see you. I have been hemmed in by bulls of Bashan, men of blood and of violence, men with great mouths and

cursing, rumbling bellies. Know that I am a poor priest, from the parts about Roymer. I had been down to the sea coast—to Blackhaven—to take leave of a good friend. Returning, I lost my way in this great wilderness; I had been ten hours without food, and it was cold down there in the moonlight, and the night air catches me in the throat.”

He began to cough, giving queer rasping jerks, and holding his ribs. His credulous eyes looked at Pelleas as though saying: “There—you see!”

“‘Deo Gratias!’ cried I, when I saw a light on a hill. And so I climbed up here. Dear God, what a crowd of bloody men quarrelling and shouting round a great fellow with a white face who spat and rolled about as though he were drunk. They caught hold of me and tore my poor clothes. I was like a hare, my friend, in the thick of the hounds. I asked them to be merciful, and said that I was cold and hungry. That was unwise. They stuffed a glove in my mouth, sat me down in a great iron pot, and would have put me on the fire had not the big man smitten some of them and given me peace.”

Beyond the old man’s babblings Pelleas had a vision of Joan waiting and watching under the shadows of the trees. He imagined her troubled eyes looking up at Birchhanger. Meanwhile this pantaloon cut emotional capers and pitied himself greatly, constraining Pelleas to kick against the pricks of a wilderness of words.

The talk began to revolve again, and Pelleas

thrust in a question, like a staff between the spokes of a wheel. He noticed that the credulous eyes regarded him with sudden acuteness.

"An old man——?"

"A very old man. The lord of this tower, and hill."

"My good son, do not speak of it, do not speak of it!"

He made little thrusting gestures with his open hands, eyes rolling upwards, the corners of his mouth depressed. Abruptly his mind seemed to catch at something. He stared at Pelleas as though he were on the edge of a discovery.

"The young man in the brown smock! Why, to be sure, it is brown! And a club, the huge fellow was cursing someone who had struck him with a club! The girl, too! My poor wits! I have something to accomplish—something to accomplish."

He limped up and down, tapping his forehead. Then he ejaculated, came round, and laid a hand on Pelleas's arm.

"Sir Simeon of Birchhanger, Sir Simeon of Birchhanger, hey?"

Pelleas eyed him as a thing that had to be humoured. The priest was off again, narrating, gesticulating, limping to and fro.

"Yes, Simeon of Birchhanger, they brought him down here into the hall, a very old man—and he wept. The brutes laughed. They took me and pushed me against him. 'Let the devil-jumpers

kiss,' said they. And we old men, we held to each other, my son, like men in a storm at sea. Then the giant—they called him Goliath—roared at us over the heads of the men. 'The old sheep can shrive the ram. Let them alone awhile. I shall have a white head myself some day.' "

He muttered, snapped his fingers, and looked up at Pelleas with extraordinary excitement.

"We went aside, we old men. We wept together. He, a scholar, a man of solitude, was being dragged from his own house as a sorcerer; and his only child had deserted him. They were taking him to a place called the Red Tower, to stand before his over-lord the King. God help him! It was the girl's leaving him that had cut him to the quick.

"Then the men came and threw us apart roughly, and I fell against the wall, and lay like one dead."

He tossed his arms and made a noise in his throat.

"When I came by my wits again they had gone, all—Sir Simeon, and the giant with the fat, white face. I heard a rat gnawing behind the wall. Yet it was very still. The fire had sunk to a red heap, and I knelt up and prayed. It was very terrible to be alone in the silence and the darkness."

A forlorn calm fell on him. He looked for the stool, sat down, and stared at the floor.

"My son," he said, "I have thanked Mother Mary that I have no child."

His eyes came up peeringly, searchingly to Pelleas's face.

"Youth is hard and selfish. Well, well! A word—a word to that girl. But then—presumption, pride of soul! Bitter thoughts come afterwards, the faces out of the fog."

He turned his back on Pelleas, drew his cloak over his head, and shut out the world. Pelleas eyed him a moment, and then went noiselessly out of the hall.

As Pelleas went down the hill under the birch trees he asked himself what he should tell Joan. The exultation had gone out of him, and a grim tenderness had taken its place, a tenderness that struggled with what he believed to be the truth. Pelleas saw the branching of two paths. If he told Joan of Birchhanger the truth she would go instantly to join her father. He was as sure of that as he was sure of his own dread of such a sacrifice. The Red Tower, Dame Isabeau, the King—Goliath! Mother of God, it would be like throwing her into a pit full of evil beasts! This father of hers was a purblind, whining, and cowardly fool. To drag his daughter into the toils of such men as Goliath and the King! Pelleas came to the point of telling himself that a lie would be merciful and honest. Joan, young, clean, comely, full of a new wonder, sacrificed to this old man who had perhaps no more than a few months to live! The thing was abominable, a dragging of devotion into the mud.

Half way across the valley Pelleas stopped and looked back at Birchhanger. What should he say?

The blue of the sky, the merciful sweet greenness of the world, the fluttering song of a lark above, swept upon him with a tremor of tenderness and compassion. By the breath of his manhood he swore that he would tell her a lie; twist that old gabbler's tale into a fairer meaning.

Pelleas was knee-deep in the bracken that spread like the green wash of a wave from the sea of the woods when he caught his first glimpse of Joan. She was standing beside the trunk of an oak, the fingers of one hand mechanically following the patterning of the bark. There was no eagerness on her face. Her eyes had a brooding look, and were empty of light.

She did not move to meet him, but stood quite still, letting the news come to her, poising herself between hope and fear.

"So—he is not there?"

Pelleas felt the heart's urgency beneath that passive courage.

"No."

"And Goliath?"

"Gone."

"Then there is no one in Birchhanger?"

"An old priest."

"What priest?"

"From Roymer way. He had lost himself, and saw the light on the hill. Goliath's men were rough with him, but left him there when they went."

"Did he tell you his name?"

Joan of the Tower

"No. He had white hair and a lame foot."

Joan dropped her hand from the tree trunk and stood motionless. Her eyes seemed to change colour, growing grey and shadowy, and then swimming with blue light. Pelleas watched her face. Presently her eyes came from the distance to his.

"Could the priest tell you anything?"

Pelleas felt as though two great hands were twisting his will in opposite ways.

"Yes—a little."

"Tell me."

She came two steps nearer, and her eyes held his.

"They took your father away."

"Goliath?"

"Yes—Goliath."

"Where?"

Pelleas shut his lips and delayed. That moment of hesitating silence was the first slip towards disaster. Joan caught at it with a hawk's swoop of intuition.

"Tell me everything."

Pelleas saw his blunder, and talked to cover it.

"The priest spoke with your father. They left them together awhile in the hall. I could tell that Goliath's men have frightened the old man. He was like a cat that had been worried by dogs. There was nothing——"

Joan came close to him, looking in his eyes.

"Pelleas."

He threw back his head.

"I trust you—remember that I trust you."

For some seconds they looked at each other in silence. Pelleas felt her overmastering sincerity prevailing against his prejudice and his pity.

"Goliath has taken him to the Red Tower."

The truth was out—and he looked for the pain upon her face.

"There!"

"Yes."

She turned sharply and stood with her back to him, her hand over her mouth. How long she stood thus Pelleas did not know. He saw a slight jerking of her shoulders, but no sound came.

When she turned again her face was white and tearless. And on her hand he noticed the red marks of teeth.

"I shall go to the Red Tower," she said quietly, looking at Birchhanger upon its hill.

Pelleas stood dumb. He felt a tumultuous, passionate stirring in him, and a labouring of the heart. His wallet lay at the foot of the tree. He went and picked it up, looked at it, threw it aside, and turned with set face.

"You cannot go!"

Joan went back a little with something of the motion of a cypress swayed by the wind.

"Pelleas!"

He thrust out both arms, the hands clenched.

"You cannot go! Think—into such hands! Mother of God—it would be damnable!"

A wave of colour passed over her face and left it white. Her eyes looked at Pelleas with a quick, hesitating kindness and her lips trembled a little.

"Pelleas," she said.

He dropped his hands, and his face softened.

"If death were near anyone you loved, would you stay away?"

"But this—this is different!"

"Yet, if you were in my place——?"

An impatience that was almost savage stung him to rough words.

"You are throwing yourself into the fire," he said;

"I might have lied to you. As for your father——"

She turned and hid her face from him.

"Oh, how can such words help me——!"

And Pelleas saw that she was weeping.

XXIV

Pelleas's Eyes are Opened

JOAN and Pelleas were still five miles from the Red Tower when the sun went down behind a forest of pines. The track ran along the ridge of a hill, and dropped towards a valley that a few moments ago had been full of golden vapour. Very suddenly the sky had grown cold, and a massive bar of crimson cloud had cooled to rusty purple. The blue twilight came flowing in, changing red and gold to grey, and making the land seem strange and still.

Joan's face lifted itself with silent weariness towards the west. She had cut her shoe on the edge of a flint, and blood showed on the leather. Pelleas had noticed that blood an hour ago, and had said nothing. Joan's face had betrayed no pain. But now with the coming of the greyer light her features grew pinched and her eyes lost their lustre.

A wood of oaks loomed up like a piled cloud against the sky. Between the trunks the west shone the colour of birch leaves in autumn. Pelleas's eyes scanned the valley, and then swept round from the thicket of oaks to Joan's tired and lustreless face.

"We had better rest for the night."

Yet he was surprised when she showed a forlorn consent, and glanced at her torn shoe. Since that outburst of bitter weeping in the woods by Birch-hanger she had never faltered or looked back, but had pushed on with a dry-eyed obstinacy that had filled Pelleas with an immense and savage compassion. He had gone silently most of the day, turning aside once to buy bread at a swineherd's lodge, and again to cut an oak staff with the girdle-knife Joan lent him. He had told himself through all the miles that this sacrifice was an heroic abomination. Yet the sharp lash those tears of hers had given him had kept him from uttering what was in his heart. He had trudged stubbornly, his mood moving between inarticulate and wondering passion and a kind of bitter rage at the accursed way in which things happened.

"My foot is beginning to hurt me."

Pelleas knew that it must have been hurting her for the last five miles. He had thought more than once of offering to carry her, but that slim, purposeful figure had a poise that was peculiarly its own. It was no longer a matter of closed lids, lax limbs, and moonlight. In many ways Joan filled the man with timidity.

"You will be lame to-morrow unless you rest," he said. "It will be warm and clear to-night. And there are worse places to shelter in than an oak wood in summer."

She glanced about her dubiously, with the air of

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one who is lost. Her body no longer responded to the prick of her will. The dull and troubled vacillation in her eyes made Pelleas both impatient and gentle.

"No more trudging to-night. I can build you a shelter of boughs, and we have food. I tell you, too, that I have done enough."

She looked at him with a penitent start of the eyes.

"Are you tired?"

The condition depended upon circumstances. Pelleas was likely to be rebelliously weary so long as they went towards the Red Tower.

"Well, I have been two days and part of a night on my feet. No sleep, either."

Instantly she was troubled, gentle, and compliant. The change sent Pelleas into a passion of inward and irrational abuse. What did a woman mean by thinking that a man could be tired! And here was she, with a bleeding foot, pitying him! He had a sudden desire for activity.

"It does not do to take too much care of one's body," he said; "this wood will serve us as well as a castle."

They went up the grass slope, and under oak boughs that swept within a bow's length of the ground, Pelleas throwing his wallet and staff under a ragged holly bush whose boughs made struggling gestures towards the light. Darkness was closing in under the trees, and Pelleas began to break boughs right and left and pile them to make a bower.

Joan of the Tower

Joan had seated herself at the foot of a tree, and was taking off her shoe. Pelleas had a glimpse of her face through the dusk, and there was a little knot of pain upon her forehead.

She looked up and met his eyes.

"It will carry me another five miles," she said, "and that is all I ask of it."

Pelleas caught at a bough, broke it, and twisted at it savagely when the tough fibres still held.

"If that were the King's neck," he said, "I should be happier over this journey."

Before the moon rose Pelleas was sitting under an oak on the edge of the wood, and staring sullenly into the night. Joan had crept into the shelter that he had built, and the long day's weariness had put her to sleep. As for Pelleas—the thought of sleep was far from him; for so gentle and placid-breathed a thing had no communion with the restless discontent that possessed his heart.

The moon rose, a yellow dome cut by the black outline of a distant hill. Pelleas stared at it, watched it draw clear of the earth and climb slowly into the sky. The steady, unhesitating ascent of that great white circle seemed to throw into contrast the hot indecision of his own temper. Moreover, it sent his thoughts back to the flight from Birchhanger and the memory of Joan lying passive in his arms. A start of savage pain flew from him like flames from a wind-stirred fire. He sat with his chin on his fists and stared into the night, sometimes turning

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his head towards the shelter of leaves where the girl slept.

Pelleas began to ask himself questions. Why should Joan go to the Red Tower? Why should he suffer her to go? Had he not strength enough in heart and body to spread his arms and say "no further!" He could take her up while she slept and carry her away into the forest. Perhaps she would struggle, plead with him, utter reproaches. What then? He would be saving her from these wolves; and in the days to come she might bless him and be grateful.

Far away and below him Pelleas saw a red tuft of fire shine out above the blackness of the heaths and woods. It was distant and very minute, a cresset burning upon the Red Tower, a sinister eye to the summer night. As Pelleas watched it he bethought himself of Goliath's furious white face, and the red eyes of the King.

He rose up suddenly, and going to the shelter of oak boughs, stood there listening. The sound of Joan's breathing spaced out the silence of the night. Pelleas went on one knee and looked in to see the dim outline of her body and the grey oval of her face. The soundness of her sleep was like a smothering hand placed over the mouth of his desire. It seemed to him intolerable that she should sleep so placidly, with the to-morrow waiting to seize her with unfriendly hands.

Pelleas's impatience flared to the point of pain.

Joan of the Tower

Something seemed to twist and break in him, and like the surging of molten metal from a furnace, understanding poured forth in a fiery flood. He stood and trembled, holding his breath, and closing his eyes. A voice within him uttered one great cry and then sank into silence. The hush of the night was vast and wonderful, but in Pelleas's heart there was uproar and confusion.

This girl—this sleeping thing, this creature of dolour and distress had become the dear need of his whole soul. She was hunger, thirst, the beat of his heart, the red blood in his body. His impulses went towards her as mists rise to the sun. He desired her hands to be his hands, her lips his lips. She was his necessity, his world within a world.

Then for a contrast his imagination showed him Joan in the grip of that great ape, the King. The ugliness of the vision made Pelleas feel an acute and savage anguish that was partly of the body, and partly of the soul. He gave a fierce inward cry, bit his lips, and woke to tempestuous decision. The oak boughs were tossed aside from the sleeping figure. Pelleas bent down, and took her into his arms.

She woke with a sharp cry, and her hands went to his throat.

“Who are you? Set me down——”

He answered hoarsely, because of the grip of her fingers.

“Pelleas. I am saving you. Lie still.”

Her hands dropped and she lay quiet for the mo-

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ment, her head upon his shoulder. The moonlight that sifted between the boughs of the oaks showed Pelleas her white face and her shadowy and enquiring eyes.

"What are you doing? What has happened?"

He was carrying her out into the moonlight and towards the road. His breath came in great gasps. A divine madness had hold of him.

"I am saving you."

He felt her body stiffen a little and saw her eyes dilate.

"Pelleas!"

"You are not going to the Red Tower. No—by God, I can save you that."

She gave a low cry and struggled a little.

"Pelleas, set me down. I must go——"

He held her grimly, and paused on the edge of the wood.

"No, no. I tell you I saw the King last night, a man with the eyes of a wild beast!"

"Can I help that? Set me down."

"No. I shall carry you away from these wolves. You can kill me if you like when I have done my part."

Her body relaxed.

"Fool, where can you take me? Can you run as fast as a horse can gallop? I have no friends now in these parts."

"As to that," he said, "they will have to kill me to take you away."

Their eyes met, and held in one long look. Joan was breathing fast, and her breath touched Pelleas's face.

"Set me down," she pleaded.

He shook his head.

"Yesterday I might have saved you with a lie. Now, I will save you with the strength of my whole body."

He felt her head rest more heavily upon his shoulder. A glimmer of light came into her eyes, and set the blood surging in his brain. She lay quietly in his arms, and looked into his face.

"Pelleas."

"Yes?"

"I dreamt—such dreams; they were horrible! And to-morrow! No, it is to-day——"

His face shone in the moonlight.

"My life," he said, "I, Pelleas, am no man's son—a wanderer, a fellow of no account. I ask nothing but that I may serve you. Some day I will tell you how I came into the Wold."

She looked at him with half-closed eyes.

"Ah, if it could be!"

"It shall be. Mother of God, you shall not go to the King!"

She gave a quick, strange cry, and Pelleas felt her shiver. Then—her arms were about his neck, and he had bent his head, and set his mouth to hers. Their bodies stiffened, and yet quivered with the passion of it. Youth held youth. Heart beat against heart.

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Joan's mouth sank away from his. She drew in her breath deeply, and lay relaxed within his arms. Her eyes closed, showing the dark droop of their lashes. Pelleas was smitten with great awe.

"What have I done!" he said. "Dear heart, it was not for that I took you in my arms."

She opened her eyes at him and smiled.

"Say nothing. What has happened to us! I feel, in my heart——"

She grew silent, and clung to him with sudden fear, hiding her face upon his shoulder.

"Tell me what I am to do?" he asked her.

She said nothing for the moment, and then the new words came.

"Carry me, Pelleas—carry me in your arms until you are tired."

XXV

The Heart of a Woman

THEY turned back into the wilder country, Joan lying in the man's arms, her white face close to his. She was very silent, and her eyes had an inward musing look. As for Pelleas, he said little. The girl was lying against his heart, and the night was a dim marvel, a mystery through which he wandered, wondering at himself and at the sacred thing that had come to him.

He could not have told how long or how far he had carried her when she stirred in his arms, and vowed that he was tired.

"Set me down," she said, "I will let you carry me no further."

He looked at her dearly, doubtingly, but obeyed.

"I could carry you all night," he said.

She stood close and let him look into her eyes.

"How strong you are. But—now—I am going to rule for a while. There is the to-morrow to be remembered. You shall sleep while I watch."

They had come to a place where a great sheet of bracken stretched like a silent sea between two black forest headlands. The fern-fronds bent beneath their feet, and sent up a wild fragrance. The

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moon swam in a velvet sky, and the whole world seemed very still. Joan sat down amid the bracken, and her soft eyes lifted to Pelleas's face.

"Come. You shall sleep now, and I will watch."

He trampled a place for himself a yard from where she sat. Bracken stems stood between them as he lay, but Pelleas could see the moonlight in her eyes, and the utter blackness of her hair.

"Sleep seems far away," he said.

"But I will you to sleep. Think of the long journey we may have to make."

"Yes."

"Shut your eyes."

He closed his eyes, and heard a sudden rustling of the bracken. She had glided through the fern fronds, and her face overhung his.

"Now, Pelleas—sleep."

Her mouth met his with a quick, passionate tenderness. There was something poignant about the impulse, and a strange mist hung in her eyes. She glided away again, and Pelleas lay still. He could see her sitting in the moonlight with her face between her hands.

So sleep came to Pelleas as he lay amid the bracken under the moon. He had believed that he would never close his eyes that night, but presently sleep came to him, falling like rain upon a thirsty land.

The day had broken when Pelleas awoke, and the sky above him was a thin, cold blue. Greyness cov-

ered the woods. There was no stir or breathing in the bracken. Dew had fallen heavily, and the stillness of the dawn was utter and complete.

Pelleas sat up, and stared about him with a vague sense of having awakened to a consciousness of loss. Something dangled against his right wrist. He glanced down and saw a little silver cross lying upon the brown skin. It was tied to his wrist by a black strand of hair.

Pelleas sprang up, frowning, and looking right and left. Close to him was the patch of broken bracken where Joan had lain. Everywhere the green fern stretched solitary and still to the barriers of the woods. He turned slowly, searching the whole space with puzzled eyes.

A thought struck him. She was hiding somewhere in the bracken. He called her by name.

“Joan—Joan——”

The woodland scene remained very still and silent. There was no movement in the bracken, no shy face rising to meet his eyes.

Suddenly he understood. Pity and remorse had come upon her. She had stolen away while he had slept.

He remembered the silver cross, and put it to his mouth. Then he called once more: “Joan—Joan.”

The grey silence of the dawn refused him an answer.

Pelleas's heart gave a great passionate cry. He began to run through the bracken, following the

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faint track he had trampled over night. One thought possessed him, and that was to overtake Joan before she could reach the Red Tower. He would carry her away by force. Neither the King nor Goliath should touch her with their hands.

Pelleas ran many miles that morning losing his way, and casting about desperately for the Red Tower in the valley. Noon came before he topped a low hill and saw the tower standing red amid its waters. Pelleas ran on down the hillside, stopped suddenly and held his breath, for there, down yonder at the edge of the mere, he saw a little figure in green, waiting.

He ran on again, paused, shouted, and stood rigid. The black barge had put out from the water-gate and was crossing the mere. Pelleas saw the faint splash of the oars, and the figures of men rowing. The barge touched the bank, remained motionless a moment, and then put back over the water.

Pelleas stood with the silver cross pressed to his mouth, staring at the distant mere and the black shape that moved across it. They were taking Joan into the Red Tower, into the hands of the King.

Pelleas felt the strength go out of his heart. He stood, and watched the black barge disappear, a bitter helplessness gripping him. Yet neither he nor Joan guessed that Sir Simeon of Birchhanger was dead.

XXVI

The Hills Above Roymer

A GAUNT, half-starved, hunted man haunted that part of the forest lying around the valley of the Red Tower. Tough grass was bound about his naked feet, and his brown smock hung in tatters. Hair and beard were unshorn and barbaric. The scar of a lately healed wound showed above one eyebrow, and his eyes looked watchfully out of a fierce brown face.

This wolf of the woods was Pelleas, half-starved and hunted, yet lurking within sight of Dame Isabeau's tower, and descending at night into the valley. Pelleas had done many mad things since he had seen Joan cross the water in Isabeau's black barge. Twice he had swum the mere at night, scrambled over the palisades, and gone gliding up passage-ways and across courts, and fumbling at closed doors. The second time he had been caught by the guard, slashed across the face, and driven back into the water. Then they had sent out dogs, and riders to hunt him in the woods, and Pelleas—desperate and stubborn, had lived the life of a wild beast. His one desire was to keep the Red Tower under his eyes that he might watch the comings and goings,

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and wait for some glimpse of Joan. Yet never once did he see the girl. Never once did he see Goliath or the King. Armed men came and went, lords, knights, free-lances from over the sea. But Pelleas, hungry and half-naked, had no power to parley with men who rode in steel.

A month passed before a misery of disgust took him and sent him wandering northwards across the Great Wold towards Roymer. A sense of his own helplessness had eaten into his heart, and he had learnt how much hung upon the blade of a sword. In that notable book that he had read at Roding matters had gone comfortably for the good knight and the hero. There had been sorrowings, blood-spillings, lust and love in combat, but the flash of the hero's sword had come with splendour through all the dark devices of the devil. But this book of brave happenings, and the book of the world, appeared to contradict each other. Pelleas, full of the valour and confidence of youth, had charged the giant Things-as-they-are, and the giant had taken him and flung him into a thorn bush. His adventures had been nothing but misadventures. Rags, wounds, scratches, blistered feet, an empty stomach, a sore heart! The devil and the worldlings were far stronger than he had imagined. Youth might shout and flourish a club, but Wickedness did not fall into ruins. Strong rogues continued to be abominably strong. The great ones of the earth did not so much as look to see who had shouted.

Pelleas had the bitter memories of a man who had been struggling and kicking in the thick of a tangle of thorns. He was sore, enlightened, wiser as to his own strength. And through all the bitterness of his defeat ran the sound of a girl's voice singing in the sunlit woodlands as it might sing no more. Caught and caged, wings torn, spring song smothered! The love rage had cooled in Pelleas to a dead and sulky heat. Downcast, and very miserable, he went on like one weak with wounds, unable to battle with things, half-consenting to his own defeat, and yet despising himself for having failed. That night amid the bracken! If only he had beaten sleep back and watched a little longer. He cursed himself when he thought of Joan's face hurrying bleakly through the moonlight towards the tower in the valley.

And then he asked himself what business he had to be blundering in this great turbulent world. He had broken his vows in order to do great deeds, and the devil had mocked him and pushed him into a ditch. His thoughts went back to Roding and that grim, austere abbey life. He began to understand a little why men had banded themselves together to live aloof from women and the world; and his heart misgave him as he thought of Joan. He was tempted to go back to Roding, throw himself at the Abbot's feet and confess himself as one who had bought wisdom bitterly, and who was ready to humble himself and to be chastised.

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Also, Pelleas's thoughts turned to his own childhood. So much of it was strange and obscure, and at Roding they had looked grave, and told him little. Who was he? Why had he not asked that question more urgently? A knight's son, they had said, and an orphan, landless, homeless, brought to the abbey as a mere toddler by an old servant. They had taken the child out of pity and trained him to be a monk. Pelleas had a belief that the rough world had dealt cruelly with his parents. He did not remember them. They were no more than shadows.

So Pelleas came to the hills above Roymer and lay down under a bush by the roadside to sleep. He fell asleep before noon and awoke about three hours before sunset to find a woman sitting near him and patching a hole in her blue tunic. The woman had brown eyes and brown hair, and a wallet and a sack lay on the grass beside her. It was Mella, the singing woman whom Pelleas had met at the forest inn.

She looked across at him as Pelleas sat up, and her brown eyes glimmered.

"I saw you asleep," said she, "and stopped to see if you were going to Roymer."

Pelleas wondered why he found Mella's voice so pleasant. He had scarcely spoken to a fellow-creature for a month, and nothing like sympathy and comradeship had come to hearten him.

"You have left the inn," he said.

She looked at the cloth she was mending.

"Yes. Blanche left me. But I thought you might come back there. Then I saw old Whitelocks. He had been at Birchhanger and had a tale to tell—the old weasel!"

Pelleas was making the most of his ragged smock.

"Who is Whitelocks?"

"A lame beggar with a white head. Goliath used him—at Birchhanger. Whitelocks told us the whole tale."

Pelleas's intuition leapt to meet her words. He rested one hand on the grass and bent towards Mella.

"A lame man with white hair—a little old man—with frightened eyes!"

"Ah, he is a devil!"

"He told me he was a priest!"

Mella's brown eyes looked at him with something that was kinder than pity.

"You are too honest, you believe too easily. Whitelocks a priest! Well, he has played everything in his time. An old drab—an old devil! He was left at Birchhanger to bait a trap for you and the girl. He was boasting that night at the inn."

Pelleas's forehead was one great frown.

"If I had known——" he said.

Mella smoothed the cloth over her knees.

"The old man, too, was dead."

"What old man?"

"Sir Simeon."

Pelleas twisted as he sat.

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"Dead! And the girl went to the Red Tower——"
Mella did not look at him.

"That was Goliath's cunning," she said. "Ah, he is an old fox. You should have made sure of killing him."

The muscles twitched in Pelleas's gaunt face. He drove his fingers into the grass, and sat very still.

"Where is this old man?"

"Whitelocks?"

"Yes."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"Perhaps—in Roymer. Beggars drift that way."
Pelleas drew his breath in deeply.

"If I could lay my hands on him! He should act no more lies."

He remained staring into the valley where Roymer rose like a white rock amid the green of the meadows. A ribbon of water went winding amid orchards, and the brown backs of grazing cattle shone rust-red in the light of the evening. Roymer's wind-vanes glittered gold. The deep shadow-pits between the roofs and towers were the colour of amethyst.

Mella picked up her wallet, and moved nearer to Pelleas. She looked at his face, anxiously, questioningly, and then put her hand into the wallet.

"You are hungry."

Pelleas's eyes came round to hers with a start of surprise.

"Hungry?"

Joan of the Tower

He looked at the brown bread she held out to him, and his face flushed. In another moment he was eating, and Mella found it good to watch him eat.

She moved a little nearer, half timidly, her eyes the eyes of a girl.

"You have had evil days? Yes, I can guess. The King and Goliath; you were but one man, and it has taken all the great lords in the land to bind a promise upon the King. And against Goliath you had only a wooden club, not even a sword!"

Pelleas glanced at her, and his eyes lit up.

"A sword! There's the need. A sword—and harness! Good God, I have learnt the lack of them these days. What use is a naked man?"

Mella looked at him curiously, wonderingly. But she did not ask him any questions.

"Then you will come to Roymer," she said.

Pelleas's eyes were on the town in the valley. Roding and its abbey had gone out of his thoughts. A new desire had come to him; he was no longer hungry and alone.

"Roymer," he said; "yes. How much money does one give for a sword?"

She pulled at the grass, and her lips moved silently.

"You can see the armourers' shops in Roymer."

"And where can one lodge?"

"I know a place."

Pelleas nodded, and did not notice that her hand was nearly touching his.

XXVII

Roymer

BEFORE sundown Pelleas and the singing woman entered Roymer by the western gate. The gates were shut at dusk and a number of city-folk were returning from the fields and orchards, while the gate-keeper stood waiting till the red dome of the sun should sink below the hills. Crowding in with Mella and Pelleas came the young men who had been out shooting at the butts. They stared hard at Pelleas, nudged each other, and began to make a mock of him, for Pelleas's smock trailed in tatters about his brown legs, and there was a rent between the shoulders where bare skin showed.

Mella kept her head high, and gave these scoffers the scorn of her brown eyes.

"Laugh, fools!" said her glances; "here is a man who could thrash any three of you and never want for breath."

A youth with a big mouth, and a broad, flat nose tweaked Mella by the ear. In a flash she had struck him across the mouth, and the lout fell back, jeered at by his fellows.

Pelleas swung round with a slow sweep of the shoulders, looked at Mella, and then at the men.

He frowned slightly, and his eyes were steady and intent. The young men with their bows showed no disposition to crowd upon him. They sniggered, and passed on.

To Pelleas this city of Roymer seen under the light of the sunset was full of strangeness and of mystery. Never before had he walked in a street, smelt the smells of a city, or rubbed shoulders with a crowd. He stared at the people, and they at him. The alleys and passage ways seemed like the tunnels of a warren. Sly and mysterious houses put their heads together across the ways, and exchanged whispers over the life below. The walls seemed full of little windows that opened suddenly to let heads bob out, old heads, young heads, grey and mischievous, grotesque, and comely. Sometimes the tower of a church struck up into the sunlight above the thatch. Bells jangled here and there. Figures moved in and out, figures in bright colours, like threads of purple and green, blue and scarlet drawn across brown cloth. Feet clattered over the irregular cobbles, and the noise of the city was intimate, busy, and full of a coarse cheerfulness. Even the many odours crowded familiarly upon one another. Sometimes the houses looked ribald and bibulous, hanging to each other like drunken men going home arm in arm.

They came to a high wall. It was the wall of the Ghetto, and Mella touched Pelleas's hand.

"This way."

She turned into Chain Alley, and presently Pelleas saw black water sliding by, and heard the thunder of sluices. Then a foot-bridge crossed into the Way of the Smiths, and through the dusk forges breathed sparks and flames, and hammers rang upon anvils. Black, brawny men stared at them as they passed, men with hairy chests, and sweat upon their faces. A narrow passage curling in and out between dark buildings brought Pelleas and the singing woman to a walk under the city walls. Houses of wattle and clay were huddled here, sullen, black-browed houses whose thatch came within a few feet of the ground. A few lights blinked here and there, and down the way ran a gutter that oozed black slime.

Mella stopped at one of the houses, hesitated, and knocked. There was a shuffling within; silence, then more shuffling. A door opened grudgingly, and a long, white face seemed to protrude itself through the slit.

“Still here, Mother Mog!”

The old woman opened a mouth that was like the mouth of a fish.

“You, girl!”

“We want lodging.”

Mother Mog’s eyes looked over Mella’s shoulder at Pelleas. They were pale eyes, and given to blinking.

“Ah, to be sure.”

Mella pushed her in, and closed the door. Pelleas heard them whispering together. The old woman’s voice sounded sour and uneasy.

"What! You with me? And the man——"

There was more whispering.

"Bless me, what do I care! Your way is your way. So long as the money——"

The door opened again, and Mella beckoned. There was the sound of someone fumbling with flint and steel, and a light glimmered out of the black hole of the cottage. Pelleas went in, to find the old woman staring at him curiously. Her face seemed to grow narrower and longer, and Pelleas noticed that her hands were like claws.

Mella was standing in a corner, emptying her wallet on to a table. She did not look at Pelleas, and there was a silent restraint about the poise of her head. The old woman nudged him, and led him into a little inner room, holding the light above her head. She pointed to a straw pallet, and to a crock of water that stood in a battered tub. Then she closed the door, and left him in darkness, and he heard the whining of her voice as she talked to Mella in the other room.

Pelleas sat down on the straw and pondered. An edge of light surrounded the ill-fitting door, and now and again he could catch what the two women said. His thoughts had passed out through the gates of Roymer into the Great Wold, but the women's voices thrust themselves in between him and his thoughts.

"Boil my bones—a pretty rag-bag to bring along with ye!"

"You old hag. You have gold pieces for eyes!"

"Bah! A gay gentleman——"

Mella's voice intervened, low but urgent, and Pelleas could catch no more.

He lay down and stared at the darkness, and in a little while he was asleep.

When Pelleas awoke next morning he found that an old grey tunic and a pair of shoes had been pushed inside the door. These trifles showed a timely thoughtfulness when the state of his brown smock was considered, and Pelleas felt properly grateful as he washed in the tub and put on the borrowed tunic. Mother Mog had a meal for him, boiled fish, brown bread, and a mug of mead. She told him that Mella had gone out into the city, and the morose length of the old woman's face showed that she would thank Pelleas for following Mella's example. Pelleas did much solid thinking as he made a meal. The money that he had earned by carrying clay for Dick of the Trowel had gone long ago, and it seemed that for a common man to live in the world he must either beg or work. The dame here would expect money, and then there was that much-coveted sword to be considered. Pelleas sallied out to see what might be done in Roymer, and had lost himself before he had taken two hundred steps.

Pelleas had many experiences in Roymer that day.

He came across a miller and his boy hoisting sacks into an attic with a beam and wheel, and stood and shouted, asking if the miller needed a man to work

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the rope. The miller looked down, made a grimace, and spat within two inches of Pelleas's head.

Pelleas went on.

In a side alley he saw an old man weaving baskets. Further still he came upon a wheelwright standing on a great baulk of timber, and ripping it with a cross-cut saw. Pelleas had often handled such a saw at Roding, and he asked the wheelwright to give him work. The man, who was old, and shining with sweat, jumped off the baulk, and told Pelleas to mount and show him what back he had. Pelleas kept the great saw purring to and fro till the wheelwright called to him to stop.

"My sawyer is sick of a fever," said he; "let us see what you can do in a day."

So Pelleas sawed wood, and earned the wages of two men.

Towards evening he found himself munching bread, and wandering along the Queen's Way where the shops were open. Potters, goldsmiths, bowyers and fletchers, clothiers, leather-sellers, bakers, butchers—Pelleas gazed at them all, till he found a couple of boys mimicking him, and gnawing their fists to imitate the way he ate his bread. A turn to the right brought him into the Street of the Armourers, and here Pelleas's sword-hunger could stare its fill. A fat man sat in a doorway, burnishing a helmet, and Pelleas stopped and asked him how much money he must give for a sword.

The armourer winked, and named a price. The

figure astonished Pelleas. It seemed that it would be easier to thieve a sword than to buy one.

"I could cut a good oak cudgel for nothing," he said.

"To wake up your brains with, brother!" and the fat man put out a tongue.

Pelleas looked at him as though he were a curious, strange beast, and walked on into the dusk.

More by luck than through any proper sense of direction he struck Smiths' Alley where the forges roared, and loitered there, never suspecting that he was being followed. A man had dogged him from the Queen's Way, but Pelleas had been too much taken up with the strangeness of the city life to notice that someone was hanging at his heels. He reached the lane under the city wall, and stood hesitating, for in the half darkness the cottages were much alike. A figure crept up to him from behind, raised an arm, and struck with a cry of:

"Ha—Goliath!"

Pelleas fell forward on his face and lay still. And it was there that Mella found him, not long after the man who had stabbed him had fled.

XXVIII

Mella the Singing Woman

FOR weeks Pelleas lay on the straw pallet in that inner room of Mother Mog's hovel. The knife had struck a rib, glanced, and missed the heart, or that day would have been Pelleas's first and last in Roymer city.

The wound healed as healthily as a wound over a wild boar's ribs, but Pelleas was very weak, what with the blood-loss and the weeks of hunger. He had to bide abed, listening to Mother Mog's grumbling voice, and to the shouts of the children playing in the lane. Mella went in and out, soft-eyed and soft-footed, and to Pelleas her hands were very merciful and tender. Sometimes she would sing to him and play upon the viol. Sometimes she brought flowers or a red-cheeked apple. And once when she was singing, Pelleas wept.

Mella's mouth remained open, but no sound came from between the lips. Then she knelt beside the bed and looked at him with eyes of wonder and compassion.

"Why do you weep?"

Pelleas could not tell. Unknown deeps of feeling had welled up in him and overflowed into his heart and eyes.

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He was angry with himself, and half turned towards the wall.

"I take your bread and meat, and lie here like a log."

"Does that trouble you?"

"I have no money to pay for all."

She touched his hand.

"Why, what of that! It costs little to live here. I earn money by my songs, and Roymer is a rich city."

Yet her own brown eyes were troubled as she watched him. For a while they were silent. Then Pelleas turned to her.

"You are very good to me," he said.

And Mella went red as fire.

Each day she would go out with her cither or viol and sing in the great market-place or at the street corners. At night the inns and hostels were her havens. She sang there and made music, and men would make eyes at her. Many had known her of old, and came as of yore, to find that this woman had changed. A new pride had come to her. She was brave before these men, sharp-tongued and audacious as of old, but the coarse words fell away from her like arrows from a steel coat. The woman in her had become clean.

At night Pelleas would lie awake and listen for her return. Once, when it was raining, and with a wind blowing gustily through the narrow ways he heard the loud, thick voice of a drunken man bawl-

ing outside the cottage. The voice was quarrelsome, greedy, persistent. Pelleas heard a door open and close, and the banging to of the bar. A fist began to thump the door till the whole cottage seemed to tremble. Then there were cursings, grumblings, the unsteady lilt of a song dying away amid the wind.

When Mella came to bring Pelleas his cup of milk, her eyes were hard and keen in a white face. Pelleas noticed that her hand trembled.

He questioned her, but she put the question aside impatiently, and shrugged her shoulders.

"Some drunken fool! There is too much ale and wine in Roymer."

But Pelleas, lying on his pallet in that narrow room, had no knowledge of the workings of this woman's heart. Very often she would pass along the Street of the Armourers, loiter outside the shops, and scan the war-gear that hung on the beam-hooks or lay upon the shutter. Sometimes she spoke to the armourers, letting grins and pleasantries fly over her shoulders, and it seemed that she had money enough to buy a leather coat, and some pieces of chain mail. And while old Mog snored, Mella sat on her bed at night and sewed the pieces of chain mail to the coat of leather.

Those days she carried a little cloth bag hung about her neck by a cord, and in it she kept the money that she earned in the streets and inns by her singing. Often, when Mother Mog was out, Mella would open the bag, pour the money into her lap to

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count it, her brown eyes full of anxious contrivings. What a sum was needed to buy a sword! She would brood over the idea, her face softening to a virginal tenderness, the uglier past smoothed out by something that was clean and brave. She never told Pelleas what was in her heart. And Pelleas was puzzled when he saw in Mella's eyes the look that Joan's eyes had given him in the moonlight that night in June.

When Pelleas was able to stir abroad Mella took him to the city walls where one might sit in the sun or walk all round Roymer without meeting a rogue or a beggar. And one morning, very early, she brought him the leather coat with the ring mail sewn upon it, and spread it upon the bed.

"I must earn money to-day," she said, "but here is a coat that shall take care of you while I am away."

Pelleas was touched, and a little ashamed.

"How did you come by this?"

She laughed, and made light of it.

"A little singing—and a little scraping of the strings."

Pelleas looked at her steadily, with grave eyes.

"You have fed me, housed me. And now——!"

"Well, we are comrades. Does one bargain with a friend?"

And she turned suddenly and left him, and he heard her humming a song.

Day by day Pelleas walked the walls of Roymer, wearing the coat of mail that Mella had made him,

and going back to the cottage before dusk for fear that Goliath's people might make a more thorough stabbing of him. High up on Roymer walls Pelleas let the wind blow into his face, and felt his strength rise again like the sap in spring. Sometimes he thought of Joan, sometimes of Mella, sometimes of the man who had stabbed him in the dark. Above him he could see the hills green with the heavy green of late summer. In the orchards below the walls the trees bore red and golden fruit. In the early morning and the evening a hint of autumn came into the air, and the wind blew keen over the battlements. Its keenness sharpened the light in Pelleas's eyes and made him draw deep and desirous breaths. Looking from the walls of Roymer to the luring lines of the Great Wold, Pelleas felt the call of the wild. He was the sick man no longer. He no longer thought of returning as a penitent to Roding. He had taken and given blows, and the grim urgency of the adventure spirit had grown in him as he lay abed. Sometimes he dreamed a little, and Joan was in these dreams. He saw himself in harness, riding a horse, and carrying a sword. The dream would gather to a gallop, with Goliath thundering away towards the sunset, a black figure of fury and fear.

So Pelleas dreamed, and vowed his vows, and went further round the walls each day. And though he guessed it not, he was like a restless spark moving towards tinder. Something was very near to him,

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something that waited to blaze into a revelation. And all the while Mella sang in the streets and inns, and hoarded her money to buy this man a sword.

On the south side of Roymer stood the church of St. Wilfrid's on the Wall, a grey and stalwart place, whose square tower rose close to the great southern gate. On the city wall, within twenty paces of St. Wilfrid's tower, there was a stone cell whose narrow window overlooked the thatched roofs of the town. The cell was attached to St. Wilfrid's on the Wall, and in it lived a recluse, a holy woman who had never re-crossed the threshold of the place since she entered it many years ago. The recluse of St. Wilfrid's was very famous in Roymer. The townsfolk brought their offerings and left them on the ledge of the window, craving remembrance in the good woman's prayers. Sometimes they brought her their children to touch, for there was said to be healing in her hands.

So it befell one sunny September day that Pelleas made a circuit of the walls, and discovered the recluse's cell above St. Wilfrid's Church. A child had gone away down a flight of steps that led into the churchyard, and a posy of flowers lay on the window-ledge. Pelleas stood in the sunlight and looked in at the window, not knowing the nature of the place nor the fame of the holy woman who dwelt therein.

The cell seemed a mere dark hole with a slit in the stonework for a window. The doorway had been

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walled in with great blocks of stone, so that the recluse was built up in a living tomb. Pelleas's head was close to the window before he became aware of two eyes staring at him out of the darkness, like the eyes of a wild cat from some cleft in a ruin.

The sunlight fell upon Pelleas, touching his hair and beard with gold. He stared at the two eyes, and saw them move. A dim face drew out of the darkness towards the window. Pelleas found a woman in a black wimple standing within two feet of him, and looking at him as though he were a man risen from the dead.

It crossed Pelleas's mind that the woman was very ugly. Her face was seamed and wrinkled, and covered with white scars. Then—quite suddenly—she stretched an arm through the window, and touched him, her fingers passing over his beard and hair.

“Ah—Lord Jesu——!”

The sharp, strange cry she gave went through Pelleas like the cry of an animal stricken with death. It seemed to echo and re-echo in the narrow cell. Her face swayed away from him, and he saw a hand dragging limply across the sill of the window. Pelleas heard the sound of a fall. Then everything was very still.

XXIX

The Recluse of the Wall

PELLEAS saw a door open in the grey tower of St. Wilfrid's Church, and a little old man wearing a brown cassock appeared in the doorway. He stood and stared at Pelleas, mouth and eyes wide open as though he were swallowing some strange sight.

It was a queer place for a door, half way up the side of a tower, but its presence there was explained by a narrow stone bridge that spanned the space between the church tower and the city wall. The old man in the cassock came slowly across the bridge, his eyes still fixed on Pelleas. It was almost as though he expected Pelleas to vanish into the air, and he meant to make sure of watching him till the very last moment.

His grey hair stood out round his head like a lunar halo, and his face had a patient kindliness beneath a surface of wonder. He came quite close to Pelleas without uttering a word, and touched him just as the recluse had done. The gross solidity of Pelleas's flesh appeared to turn the old priest's awe into astonished understanding. He stood back a little, poking a shrewd brown face forward, and considering Pelleas with critical eyes.

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"It might be the same man in the flesh," he said; "the same man in the flesh."

Pelleas began to be as astonished as the priest. What did these people take him to be that they should exclaim and strike attitudes and try to touch him as though doubting whether he was a spirit or a man?

"Sir," said he, "I am alive. I can assure you of that."

The old man gripped Pelleas's arm. The hand trembled and contracted with excitement.

"Are you not called Pelleas?"

"Yes—true."

"And you come from the Abbey of Roding?"

The old fellow was cutting too quickly to the core of his secret, and Pelleas began to be uneasy.

"Well, if I come from Roding, what of that?" he said.

The old man let go of Pelleas's arm, clapped his hands together above his head, and fell on his knees as though he had witnessed a miracle.

"It is the will of God," he exclaimed, "the will of God!"

He jumped up just as abruptly, crossed himself, went to the window of the cell, and peered in. His bald pate seemed to glisten with agitation, and his voice quavered when he spoke.

"Sister in Christ—good sister—look now, it is he! Did I not hear you cry out?"

No sound came, and the cell was very dark. The

old man put his hands over the sill, drew himself up on tip-toe, and craned forward to look in. Presently his eyes accustomed themselves to the darkness. A kind of white awe came over his face. He dropped from the window, fell on his knees, and began to pray.

Suddenly he looked up at Pelleas, and said sharply:

“Kneel—kneel, and pray for her who bore you.”

Pelleas humoured him. Either these people were mad, or he had stumbled upon his own beginnings.

In due course the old man arose, and stood considering what would be best for him to do. He returned to the window of the cell and listened, shook his head, and glanced at the church tower and the bell hanging in the belfry. Then he regarded Pelleas for several seconds, and nodded emphatically, commenting, perhaps, upon the fulfilment of some prophecy.

“My son,” he said, “twenty years ago I should have called you your own father. Such is the wisdom of God.”

There was a simple shrewdness about him that carried conviction. Pelleas said:

“I cannot remember the face of my father.”

The priest looked at him sharply, and seemed to muse. His eyes hardened, and his lips came together in a straight line. There were memories behind his face.

“That is God’s way,” he said; “a long silence and then a thunder-clap. The young lion cometh out of the desert in the likeness of his sire. Come hither

with me, my son; I have many crooked sayings to make plain."

He took Pelleas across the bridge and into the church tower, telling him as he went that his name was Father Callimachus and that he served St. Wilfrid's Church. The door at the far end of the bridge opened into a square room under the belfry stage, and in this room Father Callimachus lived.

The tales of an old man are apt to be tedious, but Father Callimachus had a grim story to tell, and he told it simply and shrewdly as though he were reading out of his mass-book. Nor did it take long in the telling, and Pelleas learnt who his father was, how he had been slain, and how Pelleas's mother had been lured into sinful ways. He sat very still all the while, watching Father Callimachus's face, and marvelling greatly at this revelation, this revelation that was the more wonderful because it gave him a double vengeance against those who were shaming Joan even as they had shamed his own mother.

These things had happened twenty years ago, when Richard Lion-Heart was in prison, and John the Earl had governed for his brother. The Earl had come hunting in the Great Wold, and even in those days his lust had been that of a wild beast. Treachery had served. It was Goliath who had slain Pelleas's father in the woods. It was John—the King—who had driven the wife to end her days as a recluse on the walls of Roymer. John's men had set fire to the manor-house, and an old servant

had saved Pelleas the child and carried him to the White Monks of Roding.

Callimachus grew more eager and intent when he had told Pelleas the whole story. He drew his stool nearer, and looked into the younger man's eyes.

"My son," he said, "for twenty years your father has lain waiting you, with his shield and sword. He lies yonder in the Great Wold, close to the ruins of his house. And all these years, his mother, your grandam, has watched over him."

Pelleas remembered the mad woman with the white hair who had lodged and fed him the night after he left Roding. He understood now why she had touched him so eagerly, since he had brought her the likeness of her son. What a marvellous strange world it was! He had looked on his grandam and on the bones of his father, and had not known it.

Pelleas glanced up from his musings and found the old priest's eyes fixed on him intently. There were those vows of his that he had broken! The breaking of such vows was held to be a great sin, and yet if he had not broken them he would never have known Joan of Birchhanger or heard the story of his father.

"They made a monk of me at Roding," he said, "but a great restlessness came upon me. I broke free."

Callimachus nodded an eager head.

"Let not that trouble you. The White Monks were wise in this matter. I spoke once with the

Abbot. They had not pledged you utterly. Had you spoken to your Abbot?"

Pelleas said:

"I was afraid."

"It is better to be afraid of one's own fear. And these arms of your father's? He was a good knight and very trusty."

Pelleas's eyes flashed suddenly.

"I would bear my father's arms," he said; "I am very strong, and no one has seen me ashamed."

Callimachus made the sign of the Cross.

"We are in God's hands," he said.

He arose, opened the door, and crossed the bridge to the city wall. Pelleas followed him. They knelt down before the window of the cell and prayed.

Presently Callimachus shuffled to his feet, touched Pelleas's shoulder, and spoke in a whisper.

"I will go for a mason," he said, "to break down the wall. The good sisters of St. Anne will come and bury her."

Pelleas did not speak and remained kneeling. He was like a man who had dreamed a wonderful and terrible dream. He wished to be alone, to grip the reality of the thing, to look into his own heart, to pray for her who had borne him.

In a little while the bell began to toll in the tower of the church. The clangour of the mason's hammer answered it as he broke through the walled-up doorway. Along the wall against the evening light came the Sisters of St. Anne in their black habits and

white veils. The recluse of Roymer wall was laid upon a bier, her stiff hands stretched out as though to clasp some invisible form. The Sisters carried her to their chapel, lit candles, and knelt by turns to watch beside the bier.

As for Pelleas, he passed the night praying before the altar of St. Wilfrid's Church.

He had forgotten Mella and the cottage under the city wall. But Mella sought him half through the night, thinking that Goliath's man had struck a second time. There was pathos in her searching, for that day she had bought the sword that her songs had earned in Roymer.

XXX

From Rags to Battle-Harness

ONE day towards the Feast of St. Michael a man clad in a green surcoat and mounted on a black horse came riding along the road to Roymer. He had a great sword at his side, and a helmet slung at his saddlebow, and the leather pouch at his belt was full of pieces of gold. The sun went down behind him as he rode towards Roymer, making his broad shoulders and his tawny head look more burly, valiant, and barbaric.

Now Mella the singing woman had been out to earn money by gathering apples in the orchards outside the walls, and as the evening sunlight came pouring through the apple trees and touching the grass that had grown green since the summer scything, she turned homewards towards Roymer. Her russet apron was full of "wind-falls" that the master of the orchard had let her glean out of the grass, apples huddled together, red, gold, and green. Mella's brown face glowed in the sun-stream. Her hair, gathered up in a rough net, had fallen quaintly over one ear. She looked very strong and healthy, but there was discontent in her eyes.

Mella reached the road as the man on the black horse came trotting round a corner. The sunlight

was in her eyes and she did not recognise him for the moment. Moreover, a man who has gone in rags becomes vastly unfamiliar when he comes riding by in rich gear upon a lusty horse.

Mella's red lips opened in astonishment. She let her apron slip through her fingers, and the apples went rolling about the road.

"Dear heart," said she, "is it you, or the sunlight in my eyes?"

Pelleas pulled up his horse.

"Mella!"

"I thought Goliath's man had made an end, and thrown you in the river. Mercy upon us, what fine clothes!"

She came close, joyously astonished for the moment, took his surcoat between her fingers, looked at the helmet, and patted the black horse. Her brown eyes met his, flashed with a woman's desire, and then fell away into a sudden stare. She noticed the great sword he wore, the hilt crusted with gold. The joy seemed to go out of her, and for the moment she was speechless.

"Many things have happened, Mella."

"Ah, to be sure——"

He looked at her and wondered why her mouth drooped, and why her eyes avoided his. She had become silent, almost sullen. Even curiosity seemed dead.

"A month ago, I was no man's son. And here I am with arms and a horse."

She glanced up momentarily into his broad, grave face, and found no swaggering elation upon it. There was sternness, purpose, in the eyes.

"Oh—well, I am glad," she said.

She turned and began to pick up the apples, putting them one by one into her apron. Pelleas's eyes followed her hands.

"Mella!"

"Yes."

"I came to Roymer—to see if you were there."

Her eyes looked at him slantwise. Stooping had reddened her cheeks.

"You never came to tell me."

"Strange things had happened. I was hurried on like a man in a dream. But I had not forgotten how much I owed you."

She resumed her gathering of the apples.

"Nothing," she said.

"All those weeks. And I was a beggar. Well, I have money by me now."

He felt in the pouch at his belt, brought out money, and held it towards her in his palm. For a moment she stared at it, a queer light in her eyes, her mouth hardening as she looked. Suddenly she struck his hand with hers, and the coins went leaping into the dust of the road.

"Fool!"

Her face flared with passionate shame.

"We were comrades. And you come back—in rich clothes! Oh, I know——"

She started away, and began to walk up the road towards Roymer. Pelleas stared after her, wondering what he had done.

“Mella!”

She did not stop or turn her head.

Pelleas rode after her, leaving the money scattered over the road. What was amiss with her? Had he offered her too little money? Or was she angry with him because he had left Roymer without warning her that life had changed for him? Father Callimachus had made him promise secrecy, and they had ridden into the Great Wold the day after the recluse of St. Wilfrid's had died. Pelleas had thought often of Mella, how much she had done for him, and how he would ride back and give her the money that she had paid for him while he had lain in Roymer. For the old mad-woman who was his grandam had given him a bag of gold as well as his father's arms. Callimachus had ridden on to lodge for a night or two with a friend who was a parish priest in those parts, but Pelleas had returned towards Roymer, and bought himself a horse upon the way.

He overtook Mella, and rode along at her side.

“Why are you angry?”

Her eyes flashed to his as though asking how it was possible to give a blind man sight.

“What is there to make me angry?” she said.

“I guess that you are a great gentleman now, and that I must call you ‘lording.’ Perhaps if I come

and sing at your inn you will toss me money and send me a cup of wine to drink! How has it come about?"

He looked at her steadily, puzzled by her bitterness.

"I cannot tell you. I have a vow upon me."

She picked out an apple and began to eat it.

"You owe Mother Mog the price of two sheep," she said; "if you like, I will take the money to her."

"How much is that?"

"Two shillings."

The money passed between them as they drew near to the southern gate of Roymer. Pelleas could see the tower of St. Wilfrid's on the Wall, and the cell that his mother had never left for twenty years. He glanced at the woman who walked beside his horse.

"And yourself, Mella? I could wish——"

She became vehement.

"No, no! If I desired it I could go back and pick up that money on the road."

They passed through the gate in silence, and Pelleas's eyes were drawn for a moment to a charlatan in a black robe who stood selling elixirs and unguents to a credulous crowd. The rogue spat-tered his declaiming with mock Latin, and swore that he himself had never felt the ache of a tooth or the gnawing of rheumatism in his whole life, that he was threescore and three years old, and could jump over a five-foot wall.

When Pelleas looked again for Mella, he found

that she had disappeared. He reined in, and searched for her in the outskirts of the crowd till people turned and cursed him for bringing his horse a-trampling on their heels. Mella had gone, and Pelleas had to ride on alone through Roymer. He felt sore at heart because of the woman's bitterness, and because he guessed that he had hurt her pride.

Pelleas stabled his horse at the great hostelry in Castle Street, and supped at the common table. The talk there was of King John, how he and his men had been roving like wolves through the southern shires, and how folk feared that they would grow fiercer with the coming of the winter. A ship-master told the company at the table that French free-lances and mercenaries were gathering at Calais, Boulogne, and all the northern harbours. John had won over the Five Ports, and the gates of England were open to the adventurers from over the sea.

Pelleas asked his neighbour, a fat merchant who made a sucking sound as he ate, whether he knew where the King could be found. The merchant could not tell him. He hoped that he himself might never meet the King and be put in peril of the devil's temper.

"Ah, sirs," said a little old franklin across the table, "Stephen's days will come again this winter. The King will bring his ruffians into the land to fight with the Barons. God pity the poor!"

The merchant wiped the gravy out of a dish with a sop of bread.

"An honest man should be a match for a hireling," he declared.

The franklin wagged a brown head.

"These hired men are the old cunning hounds. They have lived by their swords. Why, to put a country fellow or a 'prentice against such a war-dog is like setting a man with a hedge-stake against a man with a shield and a sword. These free-lances and men-at-arms know how to hang together in companies, how to order their battle, how to break through in a charge, how to plunder and to make folk afraid."

The company about the table agreed that the franklin spoke the truth.

"Bury your money, sirs, and keep your women out of the way! That is my text."

"Blood and bones," said a very young miller with a smooth soft face, "if any Frenchman comes my way I'll throw him into my pond!"

The franklin gave him a tired look.

"There will be sacks for sale," he observed bluntly.

When he had supped Pelleas went out into the streets of Roymer, hauberk under surcoat and sword at side. Roymer was dark and reticent, though flambeaux burnt at some of the street-corners, and a few shutters showed chinks of light. Pelleas stopped an old man who hobbled along carrying a sack, and asked him how far it was to the Lane of the Smiths. The old man said it was three furlongs, and that he himself was going that way.

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They parted at the end of the Lane of the Smiths, the old man telling Pelleas to go straight forward until he reached the city wall. He was at no great loss in finding the row of cottages, and in counting for Mother Mog's, which was the seventh from the right. When Pelleas knocked, the long, pallid face squeezed itself between the post and the edge of the door, and sourly asked him what he wanted.

Pelleas wanted Mella. Mother Mog was very blind in the best of lights, nor did she recognise Pelleas's voice. Her retorts were coarse and grudging.

"Devil take the wench, for a fool! She's no affair of mine. You will find no sweetmeats in here, young gentleman."

"I saw her three hours ago."

"Did ye now! I can better ye by an hour. She came for her gear, paid me my money, and went. So good-night to ye."

And she shut the door in Pelleas's face.

Pelleas left Mother Mog in her den, and turned back, wondering why Mella had acted so hastily. More than once he lost his way, and went wandering down queer winding passages, and into silent, musty courts. In a lane where there were lights behind the shutters, a woman leant from a doorway, and pulled him by the shoulder. She whispered and laughed, and then cursed him when he walked on without a word. Presently he met the watchman of one of the wards going his rounds with a staff

and a lantern. The man put Pelleas into Castle Street, and he made his way back to the inn.

That night Pelleas slept at the upper end of the common hall, in a great bed of straw, and with the fat merchant and an old clerk for his bed-fellows. The clerk coughed half the night away, and the merchant snored. But Pelleas fell asleep in spite of the chorus, his last thoughts turning towards the Red Tower, and pointing him thither for news of the King.

Pelleas was astir early. He rode out of Roymer soon after the gates were open, and struck southwards along the great road through the wold. At Roding the White Monks had been breeders and breakers of horses, and Pelleas had mastered many a rough colt. It was not his horse, but his sword that troubled him, though it seemed easy for a strong man to give a good swashing blow. In the quiet ways, beside the glades and thickets, Pelleas drew his father's sword from its scabbard, and guarded and struck with it so as to learn its sweep, and balance. Once, when smiting the air with the naked steel he came upon a couple of pedlars resting their nags in the middle of the road, and the pair bolted incontinently at the sight of this man with the tossing sword.

The sky clouded over, and rain began to fall soon after noon. The valley of the Red Tower, when Pelleas had a glimpse of it between two wooded hills, looked dim and grey and desolate. Pelleas put on his

helmet and rode down boldly to the mere. He had to shout through his hands before a man appeared at the water-gate, and pushed out the barge.

The ferryman would not come close to the bank, but held the barge off with an oar while he stood and parleyed.

Pelleas asked for Goliath.

"Lording, he is not here."

"The King, then? I have commands."

"The King is at Wye, lording. So it was told us two days ago."

"And your Lady?"

The man was mum for a moment.

"That is her concern," he said at last.

Pelleas asked him the way to Wye, and how far it was by road.

"If you strike the coast, lording, and follow it east for thirty miles, you will find Wye Town sitting like King Canute on the sea-shore."

Pelleas looked at the Red Tower; its windows were dark and empty. The clouds dripped upon the place, and upon the still surface of the mere. He turned his horse, and rode away.

XXXI

Pelleas Hears News of Joan

THE woods about the Red Tower and the red tower itself brought Joan very vividly before Pelleas's eyes. He looked back at the place, and thought of that slim figure in crimson and green waiting at the water's edge for the barge to take her to the King. She rose to life and walked before him with all her comeliness and all those woman's ways that were hers and hers alone. Pelleas remembered how she carried her head, the chin uplifted a little, and the face slightly upturned like a face that provoked kisses. Her eyes, quick, restless eyes, looked at him out of the past, sometimes with fear in them, sometimes with great courage. Above all he remembered the way those eyes of hers had looked at him in the moonlight, and how her face had overhung his when she had leant through the bracken and kissed him upon the mouth.

Pelleas had brooded, and moped, and dreamed dreams in Roymer, judging himself pitted against impossible odds, and that even his own dreams were beyond him. But the sight of the Red Tower had brought a great cry from the deeps of his heart. He felt pain, and compassion, and a stormy tenderness carrying him into action at the gallop. A grim

faith in his own strength came back to him, and an exultation over these, his father's arms. The old madness awoke in him like a fire whose ashes breathe anew with the rush of a wind.

It was on the second day that Pelleas came to Birchhanger, and rode up the hill track towards the tower. The birch leaves glimmered like flakes of gold, and Pelleas's heart cried out for Joan. How he had stumbled and scrambled down among these trees, carrying her in his arms! What a fool he had been not to have realised then the dearness of the thing he had carried! And that smiting of Goliath! God, the next time he would smite him with a sword!

The main gate stood open, and Pelleas, with leagues of country spreading under his eyes, rode into the courtyard, looking about him keenly for signs of life. Grass mapped out the flagstones of the yard with rank green outlines, but a light drift of smoke rose from the louvre of the hall. Pelleas heard a thudding sound coming from the place, the sound a woodman makes when splitting logs with a hatchet upon a block.

Pelleas dismounted, hung his bridle over the staple set in the post of the porch, and entered the hall. On a stool by the fire sat a red-haired man, a pile of split wood to the left of him, and to the right a heap of logs waiting to be quartered. The man's hatchet rose and fell, sometimes naked, sometimes with a log hanging to its blade as he brought it down upon the chopping block.

"You have a good big wood-lodge here, my friend."

The man swung round on his stool like a weather-cock caught in a squall. His red hair fell over his forehead in a straight fringe, and one eye-socket was empty. His face had a lean, sly look, and his hands were bony and very red.

Pelleas did not remember having seen the man before; and by the way the fellow's one eye stared, he found Pelleas a stranger.

"Good morning, lording," said he, spitting, and feeling the edge of the hatchet with his thumb.

Pelleas stood and questioned him.

"Is not this place called Birchhanger?"

"I've heard it called so," said the man.

"Then Sir Simeon is lord here?"

"A corpse cannot be lord, sir. Moreover, the corpse was a sorcerer and a maker of images when it was alive."

"I am a stranger here, my friend."

"So it would seem, lording. The place has a new master."

"And who may that be?"

"Master Goliath, sir, the King's friend."

Pelleas held his breath for the moment, and then looked at the man calmly, and stroked his chin.

"Goliath. I have heard of him. An excellent, strapping fighter. He is the man who may do me a service. How did he come by this place?"

"The King gave it him, lording; and with the place and lands, he gave the wench whose father

lost them. The girl is a fine, supple thing with a red mouth. The King has great love for my master."

Pelleas told himself that he would wring this rogue's neck. It was as though the fellow had slashed him with a knife.

"And what did the lady say to the bargain?"

"I never heard, lording. They say she tried to drown herself one night, and was fished out with a pole. My master is not a man to be argued with."

Pelleas nodded very gravely.

"It seems, my friend, that you will be able to tell me where I shall find Master Goliath and the King. I am for knight's service."

"You will find them at Wye, lording."

"Ah, at Wye!"

"Waiting for the good ships and the good sworders from over the sea."

"And Master Goliath has his lady with him?"

The man chuckled and closed his one eye.

"To be sure, lording, to be sure. A man has to be careful with a young wife when she is apt to be restive."

Pelleas considered for the moment whether he should break this fellow's neck. The spite seemed paltry, and though he had bitter news in his mouth, he owed the man for the truth. So Pelleas mounted his horse in the grass-grown court of Birchhanger, and rode out towards Wye with grim eyes and a hard mouth.

He was possessed now by the vision of Joan de-

livered helpless yet resisting into Goliath's hands. He pictured her as wild-eyed and desperate, or utterly silent and broken with shame. His imagination insisted on her misery, and her despair. Mated to Goliath, thrown by the master to the man! Was it to be wondered at that she had tried to drown herself? And Pelleas's wrath approved of the attempted sacrifice.

He saw her as she might have been weeks ago while Mella was nursing him at Roymer. Pelleas did not take account of time. Nor did he consider the flow of the emotions, and the fact that the heart that has been desperate may beat on towards resignation. It did not occur to Pelleas that that great creature Goliath might have some solid kindness in his carcass, and that he might have stood between Joan and the King. Youth does not grasp the subtle changes that occur in life, the compromises that are inevitable. It stands for clear, sharp outlines, deathless emotions, obstinate sorrow. Love must ever be love, and hate be hate. Youth has not lived long enough to hear the cynical kind words that are spoken by Time.

So Pelleas rode towards Wye, living in a tempest of whirling passions. With the fire of a fanatic he believed what youth believes, and saw Joan before him pale and wild-eyed with despair.

As he came over the uplands towards Wye he beheld a gold-streaked sea shining beyond green headlands. Moreover, he met many country folk

driving their cattle away into the wastes and woods. The boors ran when they saw an armed man coming along the road, and shouted to one another and belaboured the cattle with their sticks. Pelleas passed carts upon the road, laden with women and children and household gear. The country folk were flying from the lands about Wye, because the King was at Wye waiting for the rough soldiery from over the sea.

XXXII

The Laughing Face of Joan

PELLEAS saw Wye Town rising in the far distance, a grey town built upon a low green hill. The place seemed girt about with the gleam of water, and the marshes north of the town were full of waterways and pools. At times Wye Town would look like a great grey bird floating on the surface of the sea.

Pelleas rode along the forest ridge that clove like a golden reef into the swamps and marshes. Below him on either hand the country looked very desolate, a land of cold greens and greys where waterfowl haunted the pools, and the wind swished through the reeds. Yet at dawn and sunset these marshlands about Wye were wonderful to behold. The meres and waterways blazed gold and red, and the waving reeds were tongues of fire.

Pelleas did not meet a living thing upon the hills, and the autumn woods were empty in their splendour, and full of the plaintive crying of the wind. Nor did he set eyes upon any habitation till he rode out upon a bluff billowing hillside—a green wave held back in the act of rolling across the flats to Wye Town and the sea. And here, half sheltered by a clump of shrieking and tattered thorns, stood the

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manor-house of Oerthemere, gaunt, black-beamed, with its ponderous roof of quarried stone.

Pelleas had no food left in his wallet, so turned his horse's nose towards the house. Beyond it in the distance he saw a stream of sunlight flashing upon the vanes and walls of Wye. The beam of gold came swinging across the marshes till it splintered upon the terror-stricken branches of the thorns. The clouds seemed to crowd savagely across the sky, and the house on the hillside glowered at them under its solemn eaves.

A ditch and a stockade surrounded the place, and the bridge was up and the gate shut. Pelleas saw a face come and go at an upper window. As he came nearer he heard the sound of voices and the bleating of sheep.

A man opened the gate and stared at Pelleas across the moat. Then he pushed the beams forward over the trestles, and Pelleas rode in.

The open space within the stockade looked like a market-place on market day. Sheep were penned in one corner, cattle in another, and a dozen horses stood ready saddled along one wall. In the centre of the yard were two wagons piled with all manner of household gear, and carters were chaining the teams to the shafts. In another cart a crowd of little black pigs squeaked and scuffled under a net.

An old man came out of the house, an old man with fierce eyebrows and a square-cut beard. His face grew angry as he looked at Pelleas, and he be-

gan to shout to the men who were busy about the wagons. They crowded about Pelleas with bills and staves, so that his horse reared and backed towards the closed gate.

The old man bellowed at Pelleas with a voice like a trumpet cry.

"Who are you? What do you want here, you scum from the King's broth?"

Pelleas quieted his horse, and laid a hand on his sword.

"Call your men off," said he; "your manners are rough enough, and my temper is out of season. Nor am I stuff from the King's broth."

The Lord of Oerthemere waved his men aside.

"You speak like no Frenchman," he said. "I am waiting for a friend here, and the fools let you in by mistake. What may your business be in my yard?"

"I was hungry, and I saw this house."

"No accursed spying? You are not from Wye?"

"I have ridden thirty miles this morning, and this is the first time that I have ever set eyes on Wye."

The old man looked at him shrewdly under his fierce eyebrows, and then pointed to the door of the hall.

"Tie up your horse. You will find food, of a sort, in yonder. It is better to fill a man's stomach than to give him blows."

And he turned away to watch the men harnessing the horses to the wagons.

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Pelleas found the remnants of a meal left in the hall, coarse, heavy food that was in keeping with the detestable climate of the land. The place had been stripped of its rough and simple furniture, the benches, the rude chairs, the dresser, and even the wainscoting of the dais. The Lord of Oerthemere seemed thorough in his leave-taking. If the King's plunderers from Wye rode that way they would find hardly so much as a faggot to kindle a fire.

Pelleas was making an end of a ragged meal when he heard a sound of shouting in the courtyard. The great door of the hall flew open and half a dozen round-headed, brown-faced fellows crowded in and rushed towards a corner where they had left their bows and quivers. A rough ladder led from the hall to a room above, and the men went scrambling up it like stormers up a ladder against the wall of a tower.

There was the smell of a fight in the air, and Pelleas saw that his sword was loose in its scabbard, and went out into the yard. The old knight with the square beard was looking through the grille of the gate, and men were dotted along the palisade, each with his squint hole and his bow, his buckler and short sword. Above and beyond the palisade Pelleas saw a clump of spears moving, and a green pennon slanting with the wind. He crossed the court and moving along the palisade, found a squint that gave him a view across the moat.

Some thirty yards away he saw a company of mounted men-at-arms gathered about the green pennon, and a little in front of them a huge man on a grey horse sat watching the windows of the house. He was holding out his shield so as to cover someone whose brown palfrey stood shoulder to shoulder with the grey. Pelleas had a glimpse of a sun-coloured tunic, two red shoes, and a hand holding a bow.

Pelleas stood square-jawed and grim at his arrow slit, for the man on the grey horse was Goliath.

Goliath looked at the windows of Oerthemere, at the deep ditch and the closed gate. He appeared to draw his own conclusions from the faces he had seen at the arrow squints. The people within had not been caught napping, and Goliath was out on a pleasure ride, though he and his men went armed.

He put the hollow of a hand to his mouth, and shouted:

"Hail to you, Jock of Oerthemere! The King sends you his good will!"

Pelleas glanced round and saw the old man with the square beard standing silent and grim behind the gate. The badger was not to be drawn. Not a sound came from the court-yard or the house.

Goliath sat back in the saddle, and laughed.

"Ah, Jock," said he, "I can guess you are there behind the gate. I have come to show you the face of my lady."

He drew his shield aside, and Pelleas beheld the face of Joan.

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Goliath was looking at her, his round and impassive face showing palpable satisfaction. His little grey eyes were bright and keen. He seemed to take note of all her comeliness, and the way the sun-coloured tunic lit up the bloom of her skin and the blackness of her hair. The man showed a pride in her, the pride of possession. Nor did Joan betray any shrinking from Goliath. She met his eyes and laughed. And her eyes were healthy and her lips red.

Pelleas stood amazed. He asked himself if he saw aright, and if this laughing woman who sat her horse so confidently were Joan of Birchhanger? Where were the shadowy, brooding eyes, the tragic pallor, the signs of shame and of suffering? The girl held up her head and laughed! She was neither dead nor in despair!

XXXIII

Pelleas in Wye Town

THE gates of the courtyard were thrown open as soon as Goliath and his company were mere glittering specks on the road across the marshes. The planks were pushed across the massive trestles, and the great wagons went lumbering out with the carters walking at the heads of their horses. The sheep and cattle were unpenned, and driven after the wagons, with much bleating and lowing. Three women, heavily hooded and wimpled, came down the outer stair from the solar, and were lifted into their palfrey saddles. Squire Jock was up on a big roan, chewing his grizzled beard, and keeping a shrewd eye on all that passed. Horse after horse went trotting out through the gate, with a rattle of hoofs on the timbers of the bridge.

So Pelleas was left alone in Oerthemere to listen to the whistling of the wind through the boughs of the tattered thorns.

Strange, even to himself, was the immense indignation that had taken possession of his heart. He had been astonished by Joan's laughter; and he was astonished yet more by the tumultuous uprush of his own wrath. The anger of love and of youth

may be a wild physical impulse, and Pelleas's anger was the turmoil of water after the breaking of a dam. For the time being he did not see the tempestuous selfishness in this anger of his at finding that a woman could laugh when he had pictured her frantic with despair. Youth demands to be shown life as it has imagined it, and is apt to rail and call the world contemptible if the reality shatters the scheme of its imaginings.

Pelleas was in a mood that uttered accusations and fierce reproaches. He felt that he had been betrayed, and that his beliefs had been thrown back mockingly into his face. What then was the heart of a woman worth if two months could teach her to tolerate a man whom she had feared, hated, and sought to kill? Of what stuff was she made, that she could forget so quickly? And this man Goliath—her mate—was the man who had slain his father. How these fickle fingers had pulled the threads of life into a tangle. No longer was there any exultation in the thought of her release. It was even possible that she could look at Goliath as she had looked at him in the moonlight, and the suspicion made Pelleas bitter and very fierce.

Well, he would see more of this! As for Goliath, his second hatred of the man was like a scalding drink that scorched his throat. He would never rest until he could cry "quits" to him. He could bide his time, and strike when the chance came.

Pelleas mounted his horse, the devil of jealousy

rampant within him, and riding out from Oerthemere Manor, descended the hill towards the marshes and Wye Town. As he rode down the hillside and looked towards the sea, he saw a crowd of white sails shining in the sunlight. The clouds were clearing from the sky, and Pelleas beheld these ships drawing towards Wye in the splendour of the evening. He counted some thirty ships moving with great square sails over the grey-green sea. And he guessed rightly that they were bringing soldiers to the King, rough gentry who had grown lean and grim in the wars of the King of France.

Pelleas passed along the solitary marshland road, with the dykes and waterways flashing under the light of the sunset. The grey walls of Wye began to take on height and grandeur, and to rise like cliffs from the green slopes of the hill. Pelleas saw the northern gate before him with one of its twin towers flying the standard of the King. He rode up through the meadows and entered unchallenged at the northern gate, for Wye was open to all those in arms who gathered to the King.

Pelleas put up his horse at an inn not far from the northern gate, but he waited for dusk before going out into the town. He heard bells ringing, and people running to and fro and shouting in the steep and narrow streets. The ships from France had come to Wye harbour, and torches were being lit, and meat roasted for the war-dogs of the King.

Pelleas knew full well as he walked the winding,

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crooked streets of Wye that death might spring out at him without warning. But there was a zest in the hazard of the game, and Pelleas walked squarely and looked men in the face. He had no fear in him, and his wrath blew towards certain ends with the inevitableness of a wind. Wye Town might be full of the King's men, yet this clutter of swords was a help and a concealment.

As he climbed towards the centre of the town the ways became crowded with queer, toppling houses that seemed to frown and pull grimaces. Strange, patch-eyed, shaggy-browed houses they were, thrusting out inquisitive chins and noses, putting their heads together like wiseacres and old women. Here and there a spire pricked the afterglow, and between thatched gables one had glimpses of the black turrets of the Castle. People were whispering in doorways, listening, going hurriedly to and fro. Pelleas noticed that some of the men glowered at him threateningly, and that at the sight of arms women were bundled within doors like precious stuffs hurried away from a merchant's counter when a mob is loose. The people faltered on the edge of loud curses, but hung back afraid.

A dark by-way fell suddenly into a broader street that ascended towards the Castle. Some distance away there was a blur of moving light upon the walls of the houses, a confusion of voices, and the blowing of trumpets. Heads appeared at the windows as a torrent of torches came leaping into view.

From the mouths of the many figures that lurked in doorways and behind the great corner posts of the houses came a whisper:

“The King—the King!”

The by-way that Pelleas had followed dropped by a dozen steps into the main street, and Pelleas stood at the top of these steps, watching the torches come waving down from the Castle, tossing from side to side and sending up swirls of smoke. Men-at-arms followed, packed close, spear by spear, like young ash trees in a plantation. Then came banners and trumpeters. And behind these—the King.

Pelleas stood back three paces so that he was under the shadow of a house. The torches came tossing by, distorting the faces under them into grotesque and vociferous masks. The men-at-arms looked in at the windows and jested with one another. The screams of the trumpets broke like surf before the coming of the King.

It was the same broad-faced, red-eyed man whom Pelleas had seen galloping at midnight towards Birchhanger. He rode alone, with a certain massive and sneering grimness, noting the way the heads disappeared from the windows as he passed by. This was a man who loved to inspire fear, and once more the torch and sword were in his hands. The people of England had begun to cower from him again, to draw in their heads, to mutter in secret. And in John's nature there was a capacity for greatness that made the terror he inspired great. He

resembled a huge and haughty hound pacing through a pack of curs, daring them to snap at him or to utter a growl.

Pelleas's eyes followed the King until he could see nothing but the back of a red surcoat embroidered with gold. Other folk were passing below him, knights and ladies riding two and two, with torches moving on either side. Pelleas's eyes turned to them with a vacant stare that told how his thoughts were with the King.

A horse shied at one of the torches, and there was a moment's disorder in the street below. A girl's face seemed to swim towards Pelleas through the torch-flare. It was solemn and grave when first it came within his ken, but became a laughing face, with white teeth and mischievous eyes. A young sprig rode at her side, leaning slightly towards her, and whispering in her face. Pelleas saw an eager, gloating profile, curled hair, and the twig of a moustache. He had learnt enough of these matters to know that the man was making love to the girl. And the girl was Joan.

She was swept on without seeing him, and, to Pelleas's eyes, almost in the arms of the youth with the gloating face. A body of men-at-arms clattered by, closing the rear of the company that rode down to see the Frenchmen disembark in Wye harbour. Pelleas sprang down into the street and followed.

He threw caution into the dark by-ways and caught at a sudden purpose that seemed to mould

itself out of the hot metal of his passion. He thought swiftly, audaciously, even as a man can think at times in the white light of anger. As for his opportunity he would create it, compel it to appear.

Pelleas's chance came to him more easily and more quickly than he could have guessed, for at the Sea Gate there was a great crowding of people after the passing of the King. Some were for following him down to the harbour, others for waiting within the gate. Men-at-arms, torch-bearers, and mounted folk were in disorder, like the many currents in a mill-pool, moving this way and that. Pelleas pushed in among the horses, even using his great strength to heave the beasts aside. At the entrance of a little court that opened to the south of the Gate he saw a knot of the King's ladies who had drawn together out of the crowd. And the foremost of them was Joan of Birchhanger, sitting silent in the saddle, and staring straight before her above the heads and the torches.

Pelleas pushed through, and his hand was on her bridle before she saw his face.

"Madame, a message from your lord."

He forced her horse back into the court. The gentlewomen in their gay clothes stared, and exchanged glances. One, whose cheeks were red with paint, cackled and grimaced at her neighbour. The courtyard was in darkness, shut in by the town wall and the houses. And there was so much noise at the gate that no one heard the sound of the two voices.

"Pelleas! You?"

Her horse shivered under her as though in terror of the man whose hand gripped the bridle close to the bit.

"Well, it is true!"

"True?"

"That you are Goliath's woman."

He heard her draw in her breath as though he had struck her upon the bosom.

"They told me you were dead."

"Did you care?"

"Pelleas!"

"What a trick you played me! How quickly you forgot."

His face was a mere whiteness amid shadows, but his voice made it fierce and bitter.

"What are you saying to me? You have never lived through such weeks as I. And Goliath——"

He twisted the bridle. The horse gave a start and then stood quivering.

"Goliath! What of Goliath? Has he changed since he stunned you in Birchhanger? I had heard tidings, and, like a fool, imagined I could serve you in this pass. I can go back wiser than I came."

She leant forward and looked at him in the darkness.

"Pelleas, you remember that night——"

"When you fooled me and ran away."

"No, no! My father called."

"He was dead—then."

"Did I know it?"

"And the King's kisses were less terrible——"

She straightened, with a sharp lifting of the head.

"You are brutal! Your words are like rough blows in the dark."

Pelleas dropped her bridle and stood back.

"I have seen what I have seen. I can take the road again. By my soul I have bought my wisdom dearly. I promise you I shall not tarry another hour in Wye."

"Wait until to-morrow——"

"Why should I wait? I know where I can lodge for the night, that manor-house on the hill beyond the marshes. You and your man were there to-day."

"The house beside the thorn trees?"

"Ah, you can remember that!"

He stood for a moment, and then turned and marched straight out of the court. In the main street he caught a boy by the ear and told the lad to take him to the inn by the North Gate.

Pelleas let the boy go outside the inn, paid his reckoning, and mounted his horse. At the gate the porter stood gossiping with two women who had come from an ale booth near by.

Pelleas threw the porter a piece of gold.

"Go and tell Master Goliath," he said, "that he may find his wife at Oerthemere Manor."

XXXIV

The Hall at Oerthemere

As Pelleas rode over the marshes and looked back towards Wye he saw the town and its hill as a black outline against the yellow rim of the rising moon. A cold light lay upon the sea and upon the pale hills beyond the marshes. The dykes and waterways flickered from black to silver, and the reeds shivered in the wind.

Now and again Pelleas drew in and listened, a bleak and alert figure, chin up, eyes at gaze. A great calm had fallen upon him, and with it a sense of the coming of things that he had desired. His eyes gleamed in the moonlight, and his mouth was straight and hard.

The moon hung over the sea when Pelleas mounted Oerthemere Hill and saw the manor-house rising amid its tattered thorns. He rode over the bridge and into the courtyard, and threw his horse's bridle over a post by the door of the hall. Pelleas carried a tinder-box in his wallet, and finding a torch still standing in one of the brackets on the wall of the hall, he set fire to it, threw the door wide open, and stood on the threshold to listen.

Not a sound mingled itself with the sougling of the wind through the thorn trees and about the eaves

of the house. Pelleas turned in, sat down on a rough bench that had been left in the centre of the hall, and laid shield and helmet beside him. He set the point of his sword on the floor, rested his hands on the pommel, and waited for what the night should bring.

The compassion had gone out of Pelleas's heart, and it was as hard as the heart of a young man can be in the frost of a nipped passion. He was cool, cold-eyed, and very grim. For the moment he hated Joan, and looked back upon his memories with the scorn of a perverse pride. It was the mood of a young man flung upon the pricks of life, and who hardened his heart against the bitterness of inevitable pain. Pelleas and his sword were much of the same temper. Jealousy was on edge with him, though he would have called it honest and vivid wrath.

So, the torch flared, a solitary streak of light in the deserted hall, and Pelleas leant motionless upon his sword, waiting for what the night should bring.

An hour passed before he raised his head with the alert look of one who listens. With the sougling of the wind about the high-pitched roof came the beat of hoofs along the road from the sea. Pelleas did not stir, though something like exultation passed across his face. The beat of hoofs drew nearer, turning aside towards the house amid the thorns.

The sound grew hollow over the bridge, clattered into the courtyard, and ceased. Pelleas heard the whinneying of his horse.

It was Joan who came into the hall of Oerthemere

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Manor—Joan, dressed as he had seen her at Wye, save that the hood of her cloak was turned forward to hide her face. She looked rapidly to right and left before the torch-light showed her Pelleas leaning upon his sword.

The impulses that had brought her from Wye Town carried her some steps towards him with outstretched hands. Pelleas made no move. His face was a hard surface, throwing Joan back upon herself.

She paused, stared, and then seemed to shrink from him a little. That moonlit gallop across the marshes had brought her to the edge of her own pride. She had held out her hands to the man before his eyes had given her this rebuff.

Joan hesitated, drew back, and stood confused. A surge of blood rose to her face, and her lips quivered under her hood. It was a moment of shame for her, of wonder, and reproach.

“Pelleas!”

He rose from the bench, and passing by her, closed the great door of the hall and stood with his back to it. Joan had turned slowly and followed him with her eyes.

“So you have come,” he said; “I counted on your coming.”

Pelleas was as near insolence as he had ever been, and the words stung Joan.

“Were you so sure?”

He leant against the great door and rested his hands on his sword.

"Is it that you are tired of Goliath?"

She gave him a rapid flash of the eyes.

"What has changed you? Even Goliath——"

"Well, you love him!"

She tossed back her hood, stepped nearer, and looked Pelleas in the face.

"You came to taunt me, after what I have borne! Mother of God, you men are wild beasts; your love is a beast's love that turns to snarling when it is balked. Ah, I could tell you, but you would not understand."

Pelleas's eyes were hard.

"How can I believe anything! You hated this man——"

"Hated him! I could have killed him! But then—you blind, hard fool—you have no eyes for what a woman may be made to suffer. The King——"

She faltered a moment, and stood rigid. Then the words came again with a rush from the heart.

"Goliath stood between me and the King. He was the one man who did not cringe; and one is grateful—in such a pass. The great animal has some kindness in him, and I—I—why should I speak to you of this! What right have you to set your rough hands to tear my heart! Yes, you were always rough. The way you took me by the throat that night! I tell you that even Goliath was more gentle."

They did not flinch from each other in the storm of bitter anger that had been born of love. Pelleas's mouth was stubborn. He hated Joan the more

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because of her passionate pleading against his jealousy.

He showed her his sword.

"I went in rags when I saved you from Goliath. I tell you—that to me—you were something sacred and very wonderful. Strange things have happened since then. This was my father's sword, and the shield and the helmet yonder were also his."

"What is that to me?"

"This man Goliath brought death to my father."

Her face showed wonder.

"Goliath!"

"A month ago I knew nothing of all this. The truth came to me at Roymer, where Goliath had set a man to stab me in the back. Twenty years ago Goliath was what he is now—the King's creature. And what you are—such was my mother. That is why I carry my father's arms."

She shuddered before him, for his wrath bit brutally into the truth.

"Pelleas——"

He listened for a moment, his head turned to one side.

"Why did you wish me here?"

His eyes rounded on hers.

"Because Goliath will follow. And I shall show him my father's shield and sword."

Suddenly Joan understood. She thrust out her hands towards Pelleas as though to thrust him from the door.

"Let me go."

He did not stir.

"I left a message for Goliath. We bide here till he comes."

Joan stood back from him, and they looked steadily into each other's eyes. Dim fear spread over Joan's face. She bent, and spoke in a whisper, as though Goliath were at the door.

"Pelleas, let me go."

He raised his head and listened. Out of the night came the galloping of a horse. Pelleas's eyes met Joan's.

"It is Goliath," he said.

XXXV

Pelleas and Goliath

PELLEAS pointed with his sword to the upper end of the hall.

"Go up yonder," he said, "and leave us the ground clear."

Joan looked at his grim face, and obeyed. There was something in his eyes that silenced her and left her mute.

Pelleas went for his shield, and remembered the laces of his helmet. He called Joan back to him.

"Be quick; fasten these."

She came to him with dark and distraught eyes, her heart echoing the throbbing gallop that came nearer out of the night. She was arming Pelleas against the man—her husband, yet the voice of her despair cried out in her that the world was a wild chaos where nothing mattered. Why should she struggle any longer against the passions of men? Yet her hands shook, and her fingers fumbled at the laces.

Pelleas's mouth was hard.

"Women fail at a crisis. Take your time."

Her eyes flashed to his, but the glimmer of pain in them fell away from him unheeded. For the

moment the dearness had gone out of her hands, and Pelleas, in his anger, did not foresee how this poignant humility of hers would humble him in the days to come. Joan steadied herself, and completed the lacing of the helmet. Pelleas pointed her back to the dais.

"Bide there," he said.

She turned to obey him, with a tragic shrug of the shoulders.

Pelleas put his arm through the shield-strap as the horse trotted into the courtyard. The two other horses neighed to the new-comer, a significant greeting to the man in the saddle.

Pelleas glanced at the torch. It would burn for another half-hour, time for two men to thrash out the grain from a long-gone harvest. He took his place between Joan and the great door of the hall.

There was the rattling of harness, and the sound of heavy steps. Then the door of the hall was heaved open so that it swung back and smote the wall.

Goliath stood in the doorway, and looked first at Pelleas, and then beyond him at Joan. His great, round face was sullen and impassive, though the glitter of his little eyes mimicked the ring-gleams of his hauberk.

He advanced three steps, shield on left arm, right hand on the hilt of his sword. For some seconds he and Pelleas looked at each other. Joan neither moved nor spoke.

Wrinkles showed on Goliath's forehead, and there

were puckers about his eyes. He put out the tip of a tongue, and moistened his lips.

"Well, my friend, that fellow brought me your message. And yonder, I see madame, my wife."

Pelleas's face was like the face of a man on a windy day in winter.

"Goliath," said he, "at Birchhanger I carried a club, but here, I carry the arms of a good man whom you slew."

Goliath stooped a little, and his eyes stared.

"Young man, I am an old wolf. Have a care——"

Pelleas's sword flashed up.

"Here is the sword of Sir Tristan of The Black Ash. And here is the shield he carried when you stabbed him in the woods."

Goliath leapt back as he would have leapt from the antlers of a charging stag.

"Fool!"

His sword flashed out. He put his shield up, and watched Pelleas under the edge thereof.

"Fool—will you make me slay the son as I slew the father!"

Pelleas's mouth was a hard line. He breathed through hungry nostrils, and went step by step towards Goliath.

Goliath's sword flashed, feinted, turned with a cunning twist, and swept low for Pelleas's thigh. Pelleas leapt back, but was slashed by the point a hand's breadth above the knee. It was a mere skin wound, but the pain of it seemed to snap something

that had been twisted to breaking point within him. He gave a great cry, and charged down Goliath's second blow.

Their shields met and clashed, and Goliath staggered. Pelleas rushed him across the hall as a bull drives a rival about a yard. Goliath crashed against the wall, and Pelleas sprang back to use his sword. The blow hewed the top from Goliath's shield, and smote him slantwise across the face.

Goliath gathered himself and struck back, but the blow was caught on Pelleas's shield. Pelleas thrust at him before he could recover, and the point slipped under the edge of Goliath's gorget. Goliath twisted free, and blundered forward into a fierce exchange of half-arm blows. Once he struck Pelleas upon the mouth with the pommel of his sword, and was smitten in turn by the beak of Pelleas's shield.

Again Pelleas rushed Goliath to the wall, leapt back, and got in his blow. Goliath's face was a red blur. He dropped his shield, put both his hands to his sword, and swung great blows at Pelleas with the huge rage of a desperate and tiring man. Pelleas led him up and down the hall, past Joan—the wife, dazed and motionless upon the dais, her eyes following these two furious men. Goliath's breath came in great gasps. His clumsy body seemed to quake and heave.

Pelleas bided for his chance, and seized it. He ran in after Goliath had missed him with one of his sweeping blows, and hustled him against the wall.

Then Pelleas struck and struck again, playing so fast upon Goliath that he had his man smothered, blundering, and dazed. The end came with a blow that cut the crown of Goliath's helmet. The giant threw up his arms with the spasmodic gesture of a great doll jerked by a wire. He lurched forward, fell, rolled over on his back, and lay still.

Pelleas stood over him and set the point of his sword upon Goliath's throat. A strange cry, like the cry driven from the lips of one long dumb, passed through the hall as Pelleas's sword went home. He turned his bruised and sweating face, and his eyes met the eyes of Joan. She had come down from the dais, and her eyes were full of the horror of Goliath's death.

She stood for a moment and looked at Goliath. Then a stream of conscious light seemed to break through her haze of horror. Her eyes lifted to Pelleas's face like the eyes of a frightened child.

Her hands went to him, and her heart gave out in a great flood of tears. Anguish, and the desire to be comforted drove her to Pelleas, this man who once had been so tender and had carried her in his arms. He was solid and alive in all the tumult of her life, something that she could touch and cling to in the midnight of her dread.

"Pelleas——"

Pelleas's face was hard and stubborn. The white fury had not gone from it. He thrust her off roughly, and would not be touched by her hands.

"What have we to say to each other! Here is your man——"

She looked at him helplessly, her hands over her bosom. The torch gave a spasmodic flare. It had burnt to the socket.

Pelleas sheathed his sword. He was deliberate and implacable, a man who would not suffer himself to be touched.

"Now, you and I owe nothing to each other," he said; "I will leave you with your lord."

Joan did not move or utter a word. This last gibe seemed part of the incomprehensible cruelty of life. Her eyes followed Pelleas as he turned and went towards the door.

Then she heard the beat of his horse's hoofs as he rode out of the courtyard and over the bridge into the moonlit night.

The torch spluttered and went out. Joan was left in the darkness, standing beside the dead body of Goliath.

XXXVI

War in the Wold

MEN spoke of the fall of that year as the Red Autumn, for King John brought terror, and rapine, and bloodshed upon the land; letting loose his Poitevins, Flemings, and Gascons upon it, and taking his vengeance for the shame of Runnymede. He and his hired captains, Fulk de Breauté, Savaric de Mallein, Gerard de Sotingin, Walter Buc, and the rest, galloped hither and thither like stallions in springtime, trampling upon those who set spears against them, storming castles, and burning towns. These hirelings of the King, lean, brown, voracious veterans with hungry mouths and fierce hands, rode over the lords of the land and their raw yeomen, and made a mock of the folk whom they bespoiled. Church coffers were torn open, the priest dragged from the altar, the dame from her bed. People fled from the villages because of them, and took to the woods and wastes. Nor were the Barons much more merciful. The castles were filled with armed men who pillaged and terrorised all the country round.

Now in those parts many folk had fled into the Great Wold, for the King's mercenaries had entered from the sea and made the southern coast and the

great roads terrible. John was at Rochester, starving the castle into surrender, and making a mock of the Barons who dared not march from London to force a raising of the siege. Everywhere men made private and public war. The Poitevins, Flemings, and Gascons spread themselves abroad, burning and plundering the houses of those who held against the King.

At such a time the Great Wold was a vast lurking place for those who fled from the flames of the King's torches. Here were men who had suffered unnamable wrongs, and whose wrath leapt to the sword-hilt, the bill-handle, and the bow. They banded themselves together to take vengeance upon their enemies, but they lacked leaders, and the knowledge of war. Their blows were mere savage stabs in the dark, or a flight of arrows from some wooded hill.

It was a wet day in October when Savaric de Mallein and his Poitevins marched south into the Great Wold. With them came Isabeau of the Red Tower and her people to make a stir for the King in the lands south of Roymer. They marched by way of Adder's Heath, took Sir Peter of Hurst's Castle and put his retainers to the sword, burnt the village of Shore, and turned towards Roding Abbey and its valley. The monks were in the fields when Savaric and his Poitevins came over the hills. There was a race for the abbey, and mounted men and monks poured in at the great gate together. The

Cistercians took refuge in the abbey church, but Savaric and his men rode their horses in at the west door and up the aisle to the dim grey choir. They slew the Abbot in his chair because he would not deliver them the keys of his treasure chest. The Poitevins broke loose and plundered, and such monks and lay-folks as were fortunate escaped over the river into the Wold. The miller was the last man to leave the valley, and that, after he had held his foot-bridge for a quarter of an hour against ten of Savaric's men, and with his long pole knocked three of them into the river.

The Poitevins and Madame Isabeau's people passed the night at Roding, plundering, roistering, ringing the bells, and singing troubadour songs in the cloisters. They huddled Death away into the great church, and piling faggots and benches in the nave, set fire to it to give the Abbot a warming. And on the morrow they marched out in good order, for the lewdest ruffian among them was a shrewd soldier when the liquor was out of his head.

So Savaric and Madame Isabeau held towards the Red Tower, while at Holly Knoll, a hill that lay some two leagues from Roding, certain of the folk of the Wold had gathered together to see what could be done by men with bills and bows. Some seven mesne-lords had brought their pennons, and their little country prides. A fractious, hairy, obstinate crowd they were, quarrelling one with the other as to who should lead, when a man in armour

came riding up out of the woods on a big black horse.

A few of the woodlanders bent their bows at Pelleas, but slackened the strings when he came on fearlessly, large-limbed, and hard of face, with eyes that were very steady. The mesne-lords, still squabbling, gathered round him and began to speak, seven at once.

"Glad to see ye, Sir Stranger."

"Whose party——?"

"Savaric and his Poitevins are in the Wold."

"And that she-dog Isabeau."

"We were laying our plans, like foxes."

Pelleas looked from one to the other, and his face was the face of a man who had persuaded himself into hard pride.

"I am of God's party, lordings," said he.

They opened their eyes a little at his sententiousness.

"God may have a head and a tail," quoth one.

"Every man calls on God as an oaf calls for a mug of mead."

"Shut your mouth, Cousin Bort; you froth all over the table."

"Sir, for a fat old fool, you are very insolent."

"Lordings, someone must be ship-master."

"Well, this is a likely fellow. I know him. It is the man who drove three of the King's bullies off the bridge at——"

"Tut—tut, take the first strange cock that comes a crowing! We men of substance——"

Pelleas remained impassive and a little scornful.

"You talk too much, sirs," he said; "set to and find out who is the best bull in the herd. I will begin with any one of you."

They gaped at him and looked uneasily at one another.

"What! Fall out among ourselves?"

"Well, if with tongues, why not with swords?"

"The man is an impudent knave!"

"I will fight you, Peter of Stoneye, any day."

"Cousin Bort—I say—you wag your beard like an old goat!"

The common folk had gathered round and were listening, and being common folk they looked to the man who seemed most sure of himself. In a little while they were shouting for Pelleas.

"He in the green surcoat is our man."

The mesne-lords looked at each other and at Pelleas, and began to talk and quarrel more blatantly. Pelleas eyed them awhile, and then turned to the folk with the bills and bows.

"Let us go down and break the heads of the Poitevins," he said.

Which seemed sound advice, and the common folk acclaimed it.

As for the mesne-lords, they mounted their horses, gathered their retainers, and rode after the main body.

And all that way they quarrelled one with another, and abused the breadth of Pelleas's back.

It was where the woods broke into the heathlands that Pelleas's valiant company came suddenly upon two score of Savaric de Mallein's outriders jaunting along through a drizzling rain. There was a moment's flurry on both sides, and a scattering of arrows from Pelleas's men. Savaric's outriders were quicker in steadying their wits and seizing their opportunity. They levelled their spears, and charged the wealden folk at the gallop.

Pelleas, in the thick of smiting and being smitten, found himself very lonely in the whirl of the bustling horses. He had a glimpse of brown men running, of the mesne-lords bumping zealously for the woods chased by a few of the Poitevin spears.

Pelleas gave a shout of "Ha!—St. George——" knocked one importunate fellow out of the saddle, broke away, and galloped off in huge disgust. His men had not even stopped to see him fight, and he had no desire to make a solitary end in some obscure skirmish.

Pelleas rode five miles, and noon found him sitting under an oak tree where a bridle track led north-west towards Roymer. The melancholy autumn rain came down upon the yellowing leaves, and made the landscape grey and sorrowful.

Pelleas did not blame himself for the defeat of the morning, having too good a conceit of himself to take the matter to heart. He leant his back against

the trunk of the tree and made his midday meal with the stolidity of a ploughboy under a hedge. His face showed a hard surface, and at times his mouth had the thin insolence that may be seen on the mouth of a priest. Tumbled out of an impulsive simplicity, he was in danger of becoming arrogant. A man either gains or loses by suffering, and Pelleas had torn the softer stuff out of his heart, and exalted an immensely serious self. He had come to a full knowledge of his own great strength, and the pride in him had caught the suggestion of a swagger.

As for Joan of Birchhanger, he had issued judgment upon her with the forced assurance of a man who has had secret lapses into shame. His own heart had uttered things against him, and his jealous pride had been rough and fanatical in suppressing the cries of his own heart. The whole adventure had turned his bile against the memories of those months of summer. He sat and watched the autumn rain come down, and told himself that he was cured of his disease.

Now a man is never so insecure as when he believes himself invulnerable, and Pelleas, eating his brown bread under the dripping leaves, saw a little black figure appear far down in the valley. He noticed the figure only to ignore it, as though he had seen a black ant crawling in the grass. The figure ascended the hillside, and lengthened into the shape of a man. He wore leggings made of bark, rough

shoes stuffed with straw, a coarse sort of smock, and a cap of rabbit skin. Over his shoulder he carried a quarterstaff; and a hatchet hung at his girdle.

The man turned aside from the track and cut across the grass towards Pelleas's oak tree. His narrow face seemed to cleave the air as he came along with lean, swinging strides. Pelleas, glancing up at the fellow, saw that his brown eyes had a hungry look, though it was not hunger of the belly.

"Lording, I have run my feet to the bone in following you this morning."

The man's voice was the voice of one who was ready to weep. His thin face, with its dog's eyes, seemed to strain forward towards some unattainable end. Pelleas answered him sharply:

"My friend," he said, "all of you ran away with great valour. I did not know that the men of the Wold were such good runners."

The sarcasm flew over the man's shoulder. He was too much in earnest to heed such a twist of the tongue.

"Lording, was it not you who beat the three Poitevins at Hamo's Bridge?"

"Well, what of that?"

The man threw himself at Pelleas's feet.

"Sir, I would put a noble deed upon you, a deed fit for a strong man. It is to save one who was my Lady, from shame and distress."

Pelleas finished his bread, and brushed the crumbs from his surcoat.

"Get up, my friend. Who may your Lady be?"

The man knelt, and spoke fast and eagerly.

"Lording, there was none like to her in the whole Wold. Black as fern root is her hair, and her mouth is the sunny side of an apple. And to see her walk is to see the sunlight moving over meadows. It was because of her great comeliness that the King went about to work her ruin. And now, lording, I ween that he has tired of her, as gross men will, and he has given her into the power of one who was his favourite, a she-devil who hated my Lady because her beauty put her to shame."

Pelleas's eyes gave a start of light, but his face remained impassive.

"Who is your Lady?"

"Madame Joan of Birchhanger, lording. I was the woodcutter in her woods, till the King gave her lands to Goliath, his fox."

Pelleas remained as motionless as an image carved in stone. The woodcutter looked at him appealingly and hurried on.

"She is yonder, in the hands of Dame Isabeau, who rides with Savaric and his Poitevins. Women can be very cruel, lording, and this she-devil is brutal in her hate. I hid myself in a hollow oak tree, and saw them all go by. My Lady walks in sack-cloth before Dame Isabeau's horse, and she is chained about the middle to the collar of a great hound. Isabeau carried a scourge in her hand, and

I saw her lay it across my Lady's shoulders. Christ Jesu! Had I had a bow in my hand——!"

He bit his knuckles and frowned.

"This, because she was comely, and the King desired her! Some day God will send an angel who shall smite and slay the King."

Pelleas stared at the horizon.

"Well, my friend, what would you have me do?"

"Rescue my Lady from these Poitevins."

"You are modest in your prayers! How many men have Savaric and Dame Isabeau between them? Not three, I warrant!"

The woodcutter swam through Pelleas's irony like a swimmer breasting a wave.

"It can be done, lording. You should know how. King Richard would not have taken a second thought."

Pelleas laughed.

"Then I am to pit myself against a thousand Poitevins——!"

"Sir, if you would have others with you, I will run all the way to the Mead Bowl where Red Solomon and his outlaws are lodged. They will help."

"Thanks, Master Woodcutter, I have seen enough of the valour you men of the Wold can show. Moreover, what is your Lady to me?"

The woodcutter sat on his heels, and his eyes were the eyes of a dog.

"If you could but see her, lording, as I have seen her."

"Nothing comes to us undeserved, my friend. Perhaps she has been proud and fickle, and this is a judgment."

The man rose up as though he despaired of Pelleas, and felt that he could not move him.

"You speak from a hard heart, lording. May you never need pity and find it lacking."

And he turned and went, sullen-eyed, upon his way.

Pelleas sat with his chin on his fists, and stared at the grass. A sudden rebellious pity had surged up in him, and stormed the citadel of his pride. Cries and counter-cries resounded at the gates of his manhood. There was a tossing of banners and a tumult of swords in the broad ways of his soul.

XXXVII

The Love-Chase

PELLEAS's pride melted slowly like snow thawing out of a mountain valley, and tenderness awoke in him, with a vision of Joan leaning through the moonlit bracken and kissing him upon the mouth. Yet even as his heart warmed to her, some measure of arrogance mingled with his compassion. He felt himself stooping towards Joan and lifting her up to the level of his own honour. It was the man's view of the frailty of woman, illogical, jealous, seamed with the consciousness of self. In the spirit he rode up on his great war-horse, and stretched out a protecting but patronising sword.

The sky cleared somewhat as Pelleas rode out from the shelter of his oak and turned southward across the track the woodcutter had followed. There was nothing headlong about this move of his. It was deliberate, solemn, even a little pompous. Pelleas set a value upon his compassion, though Love may have laughed at him under her hood and longed to clout him upon the ears.

Pelleas rode to find Savaric and his Poitevins, and his way lay over dun heaths and through dripping woodlands that began to glimmer a little with

breakings-through of the sun. Pelleas saw no more of the fugitives of the morning, and his hearty contempt left them to grunt and gallop like frightened swine. He was wondering where he would be able to win a glimpse of Joan, and furthermore—how he should get her out of Dame Isabeau's hands. Forethought carried him even further, beyond the consummation of her release. What should he do with her when he had carried her off in the proper adventurous fashion? And Love, holding his bridle, must have muttered: "You fool! Only when you shall forget to be paternal shall you begin to be wise."

On the heights of Hawk's Heath, Pelleas first caught sight of Savaric's men moving against the sky-line. Minute black specks against the blues and greys of the clearing sky, they were crossing the heath in the direction of Dame Isabeau's lands, their baggage wagons crawling like cumbrous beetles. Pelleas judged that they would not make the Red Tower by nightfall. He rode nearer till he could see the tiny pennons flapping in the wind, and the staves of the spears thin as the thinnest wire. Savaric's men marched in a long, undulating column that glittered and darkened in the sunlight and under the shadows of the passing clouds.

Hawk's Heath merged into rolling oak-woods that smothered hills and valleys, but Savaric de Mallein kept his men in the open and out of bowshot of the trees. The woods gave Pelleas his chance to draw up without showing himself to Savaric's scouts, and he

beat through at a fast trot, for the forest trees stood at some distance from one another, and gave him room to ride. It was his plan to push ahead of the Poitevins, and get a view of them as they passed by, and he rode two miles through the woodlands before turning his horse towards the fringe of clouds and sky that showed the open country. Dismounting and tethering his horse he went from trunk to trunk till he reached a clump of hollies that grew on the edge of the woods. Pelleas pushed in among the boughs, worked his way through, and lying flat upon his belly looked down over a waving sea of bracken to a sandy hill two furlongs or less from where he lay.

The hill was pitted with rabbit-burrows and tufted with gorse, but what concerned Pelleas more keenly was the fact that one green flank bristled with the spears of Savaric de Mallein's van. A knight on a grey horse cantered up to the summit, planted his spear, and blew a blast upon his bugle-horn. It appeared that they had chosen the hill as a camping-ground for the night.

Pelleas snapped a holly bough so that it covered his helmet and made a green mask through which he could peer. The vanguard were planting their spears and picketing their horses when the main company came pushing up the hill, the teams labouring at the baggage wagons, sumpter mules clanging the bells upon their harness. The Poitevins were gay and gallant souls. Their surcoats had all

the colours of a dame's garden in summer, and their painted shields flashed gaudily against the green bosom of the hill.

But it was upon Madame Isabeau that Pelleas's eyes fixed themselves, Isabeau in scarlet upon a milk-white horse, and in her hand a scourge made of knotted thongs fixed to the end of a light pole. Beside Isabeau's horse went Joan, chained about the middle to the collar of a hound, and half dragged along by him with both her hands holding to the chain. The silent, stumbling distress of that figure in sackcloth could be judged even at a distance of two furlongs.

Half-way up the slope of the hill Isabeau struck the hound with her scourge. The beast leapt forward, dragging Joan at the end of the chain. Her foot slipped in a rabbit-hole and she tripped and fell, the dog swinging round like a ship answering cable and anchor.

Pelleas saw Isabeau strike the dog a second time. He snarled at her, and stood off at the full length of the chain. The scourge rose and fell, and the thongs stung Joan's bare throat.

It was all in dumb show so far as Pelleas was concerned. He saw Joan start up, snatch at the scourge, drag it out of the other woman's hand, and strike her across the face. Isabeau's arms went up, and she swayed backwards in the saddle. Two of her men rushed at Joan, wrenched the scourge away, and threw her to the ground. The hound, jerked

by the chain, and baited past his patience, leapt at one of the men and caught him by the arm. Then Savaric's riders came crowding round, and hid all that passed from Pelleas's eyes.

He raised himself upon his elbows, opened his mouth as though to shout, and then dropped back silently under the hollies. For a moment he lay with his face to the ground, feeling that something had fallen from his pride and left it red and raw. He was touched by simple and unaffected shame, and the accusations of his compassion were fierce and vehement. But for him Joan would not have borne these blows. His jealousy and his self-love had thrown her misfortunes in her face. It was as though she had been seized on by some pitiless disease, and he had reviled her because of it.

Such thoughts come to a man quickly when once his heart has been deeply moved. Pelleas abased himself in the spirit before he raised his head and looked across the waving bracken towards the hill. A cloud of horsemen had swarmed to the summit, but in the thick of the spears Pelleas could see Isabeau's red hair and white and sinful face. She appeared to be speaking to Savaric's men, and through the silence Pelleas could catch the rising shrillness of her voice.

He rested his chin on his fist and bit the gads of his leather gauntlet. What had happened to Joan, and what was passing in the centre of that thicket of spears? His anger, his shame, and his impatience

flew at the barred door of his own helplessness and beat upon it with impotent hands. He saw Isabeau raise an arm and point. There was stir and movement among the men. A knot of mounted knights began to push from the centre, breaking a lane through the crowded spears.

Behind them in that valley of steel Pelleas saw a brown figure mounted upon a mule. Two horse-boys with knives in their hands walked beside Joan down the hill. Savaric's men jostled one another as they closed in when the mule had passed them. A murmur rose from the hill like the hum of a hive of bees.

Pelleas lay rigid, asking himself what they meant to do with Joan. Not till she reached the foot of the hill did he gather what was to happen. The two horse-boys dug their knives into the mule's flanks. The beast squealed, put his ears back, kicked out, and went away at a canter. There was a scattering of horsemen down the hillside, till a tall man in a purple surcoat rode to and fro and waved them back with his sword. The mule was to be given a furlong's start before the pack followed on his heels.

Pelleas knelt among the hollies, and his face blazed with a swift, white light. The mule had headed straight for the woods, and was galloping through the bracken with Joan lying along his neck. Pelleas started up and ran back towards his horse. He unfastened him with fierce and hurrying hands, climbed into the saddle, and heard the shouts of

Savaric's men as they were let loose upon the love-chase.

Pelleas held his horse in hand, nor had he to wait long before he saw the mule come galloping among the oaks. He touched his horse with the spur, and followed, not daring to look back for Savaric's men because of the trees. The boughs swept low in places, and might have served Joan as they served Absalom, had she not been laid low on the mule's neck. Pelleas felt the blood singing in his brain. His heart gave great beats like the strokes of a great bell. He did not move his eyes from the brown figure bound with thongs to the back of the mule.

Shouts and halloos came from behind him as Savaric's men rode in, and took each his own path, for the trees had hidden the quarry. Pelleas steadied himself—to think. He was close on the galloping mule like a great ship overtaking a smaller vessel. The mule was without harness and there was nothing save the clipped mane by which he could be gripped and guided.

A clear alley-way stretched before them, and Pelleas flashed one look over his shoulder. Not a Poitevin was to be seen, though he could hear their shouts and the trampling of their horses. He drew level with the mule, bent and clutched the beast's mane. A face lying with one cheek against the mule's neck flinched from his hand, and then looked up at him in wonder.

The mule swerved and tossed his head, but did not

shake off Pelleas's grip. His teeth set themselves in sympathy with his fingers, and the muscles stood out at the angles of his square-set jaw. Neither he nor Joan uttered a word.

Horse and mule went shoulder to shoulder between the oak-trees, and the obstinate grip of Pelleas's hand mastered the beast's obstinate heart. It galloped to his guidance without spite or passion. The oak boughs slid backwards above them like the vaultings of a cavern.

The sound of the pursuit dwindled away, and Pelleas had leisure for the moment to forget Savaric and his Poitevins. He looked down at Joan and saw the marks that Isabeau's scourge had left upon her throat. Her face looked white and bewildered against the mule's brown neck.

Pelleas's heart leapt in him.

"Have no fear," he said.

Her eyes met his, but she gave him no answer as they galloped into the dusk.

XXXVIII

Dawn at Roymer

Dusk had come when Pelleas drew in, and turned in the saddle to listen. They had passed through the oak woods, ridden across a heath, and descended upon a wilderness of birches and firs. The horizon was dim and indistinct with the fall of the night, and but for the sighing of the wind through the fir boughs no sound stirred the silence of the darkening wild.

Pelleas dismounted to cut the thongs that bound Joan to the mule. His sword served for the task, and his hands felt the sweat on the heaving belly of the mule. Joan sat up, spread out her arms, and drew in deep breaths as though to throw off the stiffness the thongs had left. There was silence between them, and Pelleas sheathed his sword. Both remembered Oerthemere and Goliath.

Then Pelleas held out a hand to her, but she cried out sharply.

"Do not touch me."

He dropped his arm, and tried to catch the eyes that looked above and beyond him into the distance.

"You are afraid?"

"No."

Her face had a white and silent calm, and her eyes were very dark.

"I am learning to fear nothing, to bear everything. Is not that enough!"

Pelleas felt the cold touch of the night wind.

"At Oerthemere——" he began.

But she broke in upon him, yet without passion.

"Let us not talk of that. I have made a vow in my heart. No man shall ever touch me again, so long as I live."

Pelleas stood like one who has had some baffling message given him, and who passes and repasses the words through his mind. A fir-tree that overshadowed them threw up its boughs suddenly, and uttered a low cry. Stars showed here and there between floating clouds. The whole landscape had become a darkened blurr.

"Let us go forward."

Pelleas looked about him. His thoughts and emotions were groping in the dusk.

"Where would you go?"

"Towards Roymer."

"Roymer! But the way? I could no more tell you——"

"Before long there will be a moon. Let us wait."

"To be sure. We can cut out some plan. Roymer lies——?"

"Due north. I can ride all night. They gave me food on the road."

Pelleas stood silent, and thoughtful. He saw Joan slide gently from the mule's back. The beast stood still beside Pelleas's horse.

"I will walk to and fro a little, to get rid of the ache of the thongs."

She began to walk to and fro in the darkness, her face white and silent and set steadfastly towards thought. Her utter lack of emotion contradicted Pelleas's imaginings, and gave pause to his self-trust. He could feel the quiet pulse of her pride beating with a steadier rhythm, showing itself sufficient for her need. He had pictured her in humiliation, with scared eyes, and a drooping head. But she showed no desire to lean upon his strength.

He rested his back against his horse's shoulder and watched her go to and fro in silence. For the moment his spirit was dumb within him. He was troubled and ashamed.

A faint haze of light suffused itself through the eastern sky, and presently the rim of the moon showed above the tops of a line of firs. Joan turned, looked at the moon, and stood motionless within two paces of Pelleas. And to Pelleas her face was the moon, and the light thereof was in her eyes. Sharp awe stabbed him, and he marvelled. Slim and straight in her tunic of sack-cloth, her hair falling about her throat, she stood before him with mystical serenity. The sense of her cleanness, of her purity, came upon Pelleas like light from a shrine. He remembered his violence and his wrath, and

shame fell upon him, the deep, voiceless shame of sudden understanding.

She turned her eyes to him, and they were full of the moonlight. Her face softened to a tender tranquillity.

"You will go with me—?"

"To Roymer?"

"Yes."

He bowed his head.

"I will go—where you may bid. Use me—as you desire."

She remained gazing towards the moon whose tawny face had changed to a white brilliance. And Pelleas, as he looked at her, felt a great yearning rise in him. All his life's desire had thrown itself suddenly at her feet. His soul cried out in him like a blind man whose eyes are opened.

"Joan—forgive."

He stretched out his hands and drew them back. Yet his eyes touched her with a touch that was physical. She felt it, and stood back from him.

"I have forgiven."

Her voice and face filled him with a sense of helplessness. This white tranquillity was more terrible than tears. It seemed that her soul was wrapping itself in a shroud.

"Why do you go to Roymer?"

She answered him with the air of one who has entered upon obstinate resignation.

"Because I am very weary."

"But at Roymer the streets are full of people, and there is no rest from the ringing of bells, the hammering of hammers, and the shouts of those who sell."

"Pelleas," she said, "there are walls within walls, and silences—long, exquisite silences—in the midst of tumult. There are places where one can kneel, and draw in deep breaths, secure from the ways of men."

She still looked at the moon, and her hands hung with quaint resignation. Pelleas was dumb. For suddenly he understood all that she had suffered, and the change this suffering had wrought in her. Her heart was white and weary towards all desire.

He turned to his horse and began to shorten the stirrups, for he had seen Joan riding astride that day she had saved him from Isabeau's hounds. Yet as he fumbled with the straps, a voice cried out in him, the voice of blind love whose eyes had been opened.

"I will ride the mule," he said; "the beast is strong, and will bear me."

She did not deny him.

"By dawn, we shall reach the lands about Roymer."

Pelleas felt his heart leap to his mouth. The life at Roding, its laws, reticences, and starvations were under his feet like trampled grass. All that was deep and generous and good in him went without shame in love for this woman.

"Do not go to Roymer," he said. "I will gather men and hold Birchhanger in your service."

Their eyes met in the moonlight.

"Pelleas, I have spoken. Nothing on earth shall turn me from this purpose."

He bowed his head to her.

"Then let us not tarry," he said.

Yet she would not suffer him to lift her to the saddle.

That night ride through the moonlit wold seemed to take them deeper and deeper into silence. It was a silence that was felt by both of them, and broken by no impulsive utterance from the heart. Even the wilderness failed to bring them nearer by baffling their wits, for Joan struck country that she could recognise, and picked up the white thread of the road to Roymer.

When they reached the road she made Pelleas take his horse and give her the mule. He obeyed her without argument, and they rode on again into the long silences that were made more monotonous by the clatter of hoofs on the stones. Pelleas's pride had taken her purpose upon bowed and chastened shoulders. Sometimes his heart uttered a cry of revolt, but to Joan he was a bleak-faced man who rode silently beside her through the night.

Once, perhaps twice, she found herself breathing more deeply because of his nearness. But that night at Oerthemere had left a rough, harsh memory, and the spirit of pain was steadfast in her.

Out of much suffering had risen this tranquil, patient pride that muffled the heart-beats of the world.

The smell of the dawn was in their nostrils when they came to the hills above Roymer. From black their figures changed to grey as they moved through the moist sadness of a misty sunrise. There was no splendour in the dawn. Faint golden crevices showed above a great grey curtain. The woods were stagnant, with no shivering murmurs of ecstasy and awe.

Yet against the greyness of the morning Pelleas's love put on a robe of fire. He looked at Joan as the light increased, and her pale tranquillity gave place to the colours of the flesh. Her brown tunic was as rich as the dead beech leaves under the trees. Her hair grew black against the dawn; her mouth, red, pensive, and adorable. The sunrise of her beauty crept into Pelleas's blood. Even her tired eyes and tumbled hair tormented him.

He tried to speak to her, but no words would come, save words that were forbidden.

So they came towards Roymer, and the orchards in the valley were red with fruit. For Pelleas the apples of love and of desire hung in a mist of green and grey. Beyond rose the walls of Roymer, with their gates opening upon green meadows; Roymer with its church towers, its quaint and crowded roofs, its buxom people clad in scarlet and green. The thought of Mella and his last meeting with her amid these apple-trees did not float across his mind. His

whole consciousness was filled with the presence of Joan.

Half a mile away they saw the black mouth of the southern gate of Roymer. The road was engulfed by it, and disappeared into another world. Pelleas's eyes dwelt on the tower of St. Wilfrid's Church, and the stone roof of the cell in which his mother had lived and died.

The rhythm of the theme caught his ear. Was not Joan repeating his mother's history, even to expiating with her body the desires of men? Again his heart cried out against the sacrifice. He was seized by an impulse that urged him to tell her all that Father Callimachus had shown him of the past.

So Joan heard that Pelleas had been a monk, and that his mother had died yonder, on the walls of Roymer. Also he told her the tale of his father's death, and how the King and Goliath had worked shameful and dishonourable deeds.

Joan's eyes seemed to sadden for the truths that he had told her, and the effect of Pelleas's words was more subtle than he had foreseen. This confession of his, flung out with passion, even with defiance, fell like a weight thrown into the balance against his hopes. Joan felt an inspired horror of all that had happened to her. Her own pride seemed to be stripped and exposed once more. She avoided Pelleas's eyes, and wished him away.

"Let us turn back," he said to her.

She spoke without turning her head.

"Go, leave me. I would enter Roymere alone."

Pelleas looked long at her with eyes that hungered.

"You do not love me."

She lifted her face, and rode along, looking at the sky.

"Stay near me, and I shall hate you," she answered him; "I desire to be let alone."

Pelleas drew in as though she had thrown the vilest words in his face. A stupor fell upon him. He watched her enter the gateway, and disappear.

XXXIX

Joan of the Tower

WINTER and war came together into the Great Wold, and the crying of trumpets and the wailing of the winds were mingled. Spears slanted against angry sunsets, and armed men went riding through the yellow woods, falling leaves whirling against shields and about the hoofs of war-horses whose manes were tossed by the wind. Fires upon the hills and in the valleys told where the King's men had been thrusting torches into the thatch, and setting light to hamlets and villages. Even the bells of the solitary woodland churches were silent, many of them lying amid ashes and half-burnt beams.

In the parts south of Roymer, Isabeau of the Red Tower led for the King. Savaric and his Poitevins had marched northwards, leaving a strong company with her under one Fulk the Fat. Moreover, Isabeau was a rich dame, and able to hire men who entered the land at the Five Ports. What with her own knights and feudal folk and the adventurous rogues who came to join her, she plundered those parts at the head of five hundred spears.

Yet there were some in the Wold who stood for the Great Charter, middling men, outlaws, and a

few mesne lords and their people. They had held to the heaths and wastes, lacking a true leader, and snatching petty triumphs in ambuscades and the cutting off of stragglers. Sometimes they chose this man for captain, sometimes that, and grumbled when nothing famous came of their endeavours.

There was one wanderer in the Wold whose name began to pass from mouth to mouth. He was the man, folk said, who had beaten three Poitevins at Hamo's Bridge, and who had fought and triumphed over Red Solomon of the Mead Bowl on a hill beyond Deering. People spoke of him as being a young man, wonderous big and masterful, with a face like a rock, and eyes that could see from Blud's Beacon to Wye. It was said that he had fought with and slain many of Dame Isabeau's men, and that he and Red Solomon the outlaw had sworn faith to each other. The folk of the Wold sought for him, and, finding him kneeling in prayer before the wayside cross on Pardon Hill, besought him to be their leader. So Pelleas found himself a war-lord in those parts, at the head of outlaws and woodlanders, stocky, brown-headed men who could strike with the short sword and shoot with the bow.

When they had besought him to be their captain, Pelleas had stood on the Cross mound and spoken these words:

“By the passion of Christ Jesu, I swear to you that if any man among you plays the coward, I will no longer be your captain.

"Also, let there be no thieving and plundering, save in the houses and upon the lands of those who hold by the King and oppress the people.

"Let all poor men go free and unharmed.

"If any man shall deal shamefully with a woman, I will have him hanged on the nearest tree."

The first thing that Pelleas did was to seize Birchhanger, and hold it, proclaiming himself the seneschal of the Lady Joan. He garrisoned the place strongly, collected grain and salted meat, had banks thrown up and palisades built, and the well deepened to stand a siege. From Birchhanger he and his men began to sally out against Dame Isabeau's people, seizing arms and horses wherever they could be found, and proclaiming grace and protection to the poor. Their boldness brought Isabeau's folk against the place, with boasts that they would put to sword all whom they found in Birchhanger. But they boasted before the event, for though they made a breach in the palisades, they climbed no further into the place. Pelleas and his best men drove them out, and hustled them so roughly in the retreat, that Isabeau's people left Birchhanger unmolested for a season and came no more that way.

As the weeks went by Pelleas began to be called Pelleas the Just. Many bold things were done by him, many wrongs righted, and not a few ruffians brought to book. Very gentle was he towards women and children, and Birchhanger Hill became a refuge for many who had been driven into the wilds. Those

who followed him knew him as a man who was very grim and quiet, fierce in the face of necessity, and afraid of nothing upon God's earth.

Nor did Pelleas fight with men alone, but also with the passions and desires of his own heart. He had brought himself into the way of inflicting great austerities upon his body, not sparing himself pain or hunger in the subjection of the flesh. Often at night the watchmen would see him upon the battlements of Birchhanger, a dim, motionless figure standing in the wind and rain, or seen against the cloud-scud drifting across the moon. Sometimes he would withdraw into the woods and stand with his arms spread in the attitude of crucifixion against the trunk of some great tree. Folk had come upon him by chance in a forest glade and seen him lashing his naked body with an iron-barbed scourge. Some said that he wore a belt of thorns under his hauberk, and lay at night with flints strewn amid the straw of his bed.

Yet these fierce austerities practised against the flesh made him no poorer man-at-arms. His strength seemed to increase, and in his wrath he was the more terrible, for his wrath seemed the wrath of God. Folk stood in awe of Pelleas, yet gave him their love. For very often a great light would come into his eyes, a compassion that was very tender. Women had seen him riding with a babe wrapped in his surcoat, and a child set astride before him on his horse's neck.

The spirit soared the higher in him since the body was brought into subjection. Watching the dawn rise over the forest, or when listening to the wild utterances of the winter wind, Pelleas became the creature of ecstasy. Fasting and long vigils quickened and fired his inner vision, and he began to imagine voices and to dream dreams. Kneeling at midnight in the little chapel at Birchhanger, the thought came to him that he should found an "Order," a brotherhood of the sword, sworn to poverty and the protection of the poor. Pelleas beheld swords shining wherever tyranny and pride and lust showed themselves in the land. The Order should be called the Order of Knights Succourers, their symbol, a bleeding heart sheltered by a flaming shield.

The Feast of Christmas was approaching when some of Pelleas's men brought him the news that Savaric de Mallein had come south again into the Wold. It was rumoured that he and the King's party meant to turn their arms against Roymer, for Roymer was a rich city and not obedient to the King. There was much plunder to be had within the walls, rich stuffs, jewels, goldsmiths' work, armour, and choice wine. The Poitevins had smelt the rich savour of the place and heard tales concerning the comeliness of its women.

Pelleas stood and looked towards Roymer, and also into his own heart. It was a grey day with a northern sky that threatened snow, and Pelleas believed that his own soul was not less grey and

cold. The Red Adam no more dared to lift his head than a galley-slave chained to the oar dares to curse the slave-master. Pelleas looked towards Roymer and swore that his unrest was compassionate and chaste.

As the dawn came into the east he mounted his horse and, taking no man with him, rode northwards from Birchhanger Hill. Snow began to fall before he had ridden ten miles, a white squall driven out of the north and powdering the woodlands and the heaths with flocculent white dust. The dead leaves that still clung to the boughs shivered in the wind, so that the snow seemed to make a dry rattling as it drove through the underwood. Pelleas's cloak and shield became caked with snow, and he shut his mouth against the wind from the north. So furious and yet so fitful was its temper that Pelleas held it to be a mere passing storm, and looked for an edge to the clouds, and a hard, clear sky.

But though the wind dropped a little the snow still fell, and the whole world was white when Pelleas came to the hills above Roymer. The valley lay like a great bowl of marble, veined with dark dykes and waterways and sombre winding woods. Roymer itself looked dim and strange, a ghost-city seen through the drifting snow. At no great distance Pelleas saw a herd of sheep sheltering under thatched hurdles. A shepherd's hut rose close by, and the shepherd himself stood in the doorway, flapping his arms.

Pelleas shouted to him, and asked what he made of the weather. The shepherd shouted back:

"Thanks be to St. Chad, lording, I had a load o' faggots dropped here yesterday. We shall have deep drifts if the wind keeps a-howling."

Pelleas shouted for any news of Savaric and his Poitevins, but the man had heard nothing of them.

"God save us from such vermin," he said.

So Pelleas rode on, refusing to let himself think of the warm fire the shepherd would light in his cottage.

As he passed through the empty, shivering orchards towards the impending greyness of the walls of Roymer, wind and snow slackened, the flakes circling with a certain playfulness instead of driving like sleet. The southern gateway was a black half-moon, and a few people were moving in and out. At a spot about fifty paces to the right of the gate, a number of figures had grouped themselves close to the moat and appeared to be gazing at something above the city wall.

Pelleas saw the grey and stunted tower of St. Wilfrid's Church, and beside it a thing that rose like a pinnacle against the grey sky. He looked for the stone roof of the recluse's cell, and saw that a queer wooden tower had been built up from it, and carried a square platform of rough boards. The thing that had appeared to him as a pinnacle was a human figure standing on the platform at the top of the wooden tower.

Pelleas rode on and joined the group before the moat. Some of the people were kneeling, and all were gazing at a woman who stood upon the wooden tower, a solitary figure against the grey and hurrying sky. The snowflakes drifted about her, and whitened her shoulders, and the wind whirled her hair and blew the brown smock that she wore, close about her body. Motionless, with hands folded over her bosom, she appeared to be gazing into infinite distances, and never once did she lower her eyes to look at the people at the foot of the wall.

Pelleas felt a shock of astonishment go through him, for the woman of the tower was none other than Joan.

He crossed himself, and remained for a long while in deep thought before he spoke to an old woman in a rabbit-skin cloak, who stood at his side. The old woman turned a pair of bright and hungry eyes upon him, and told him all that he desired to know.

"It is the new recluse, lording," she said, "whom you see up yonder. God o' me—the maid will not live long, for she is too fierce in her holiness, and a marvel to the whole city."

Pelleas felt a strange pang at the heart. A voice cried out in him, rebelliously and with passion.

"Why does she stand there?" he asked the old woman.

"To mortify the flesh, lording, and to exalt the spirit. Maybe her sins have been very great. In wind and rain it is ever alike. She stands yonder

for hours, and prays, and is washed by the tears of heaven. The old recluse died before Michaelmas; she was very holy, but not so eager to die as this woman. Wonderful must be the glory that such saints win."

Pelleas bowed his head, and thought poorly of all his own austerities. He had not been brutal enough with his own body.

"Did she choose this of her own free will?"

"So I have heard, lording. The holy Sisters of St. Anne built her the wooden tower."

Pelleas remained silent, his eyes fixed upon the ground. Once only did he look at Joan, and then hastily, and furtively as though he were afraid. The snow eddied about her; the wind tossed her hair, and blew her brown smock close about her body. Pelleas shuddered for her when he thought of the cold. The old woman in the rabbit skin had gone, but her words importuned Pelleas's ears. "She will not live long." Pelleas set his teeth against a rebellious and incredulous compassion. It seemed to him impossible that Joan should die.

He rode his horse into Roymer, stabled him at an inn, and returned to the place without the walls. Dusk approached, and the people had passed back into the city. Pelleas knelt in the snow, folded his arms, and continued fervently, yet patiently in prayer.

Suddenly he stretched out his arms and cried with a loud voice:

"Glory to God!—Glory to Mother Mary! The flesh is strong, but the spirit is stronger. Glory be to all the Saints!"

At the sound of his voice Joan started, looked down at him, gathered her smock, and disappeared from the platform of the tower.

Pelleas lifted up his arms and prayed. And since Joan had borne such grim austerities, he chose to mortify himself in honour to her fortitude by kneeling all night in the wind and snow.

XL

The Heart of Pelleas

THE sky cleared during the night, and Pelleas beheld Joan's wooden tower sharp and black against the stars.

He knelt in the snow and marvelled at the strange, sinuous courses of life, and at the changes that, like seasons, follow each other in the human heart. Maugre his piety he thought of Joan as he first remembered her; and the dawn-song of her voice and the splendour of spring sent him hurriedly to his prayers. Pelleas told himself that the hand of God showed itself in all these happenings, and that through temptation and renunciation the true child of the Cross subdues the rebellious senses.

As the night wore on, Pelleas's knees grew stiff as the knees of a kneeling figure carved in wood. But he rejoiced because he bore the ache and the misery of the winter cold. The glitter of the chaste stars about Joan's tower was more delectable than the glitter of a girdle of precious stones about the body of a beautiful woman.

Presently the dawn came, a yellow light in a green sky. Pelleas bowed his head and prayed. The edge of the sun was visible before he lifted his eyes again to the tower.

All the prayers of the night seemed to return like a great wave into his heart. He beheld Joan above him, kneeling with arms outstretched towards the sun. Her face was a white light, luminous and exultant. Her hair appeared to float amid the liquid splendour of the dawn.

Pelleas gazed at her, and the awe in his heart quivered into sadness. It seemed to him that she was part of the sky and of the dawn, and that he might see saints and angels descending to comfort her, or behold her carried upwards into heaven. The silence of the morning was like deep water under her feet. And when Roymer awoke, its stirring made a plaintive sound, the sougning of a winter wind through trees.

Pelleas prayed that Joan might look at him. Her exultant eyes would send the light of sanctity into his soul. He would be content, because of the ecstasy of her contentment. As for suffering, hunger, cold, and pain, they would be glorious and sacred to him, holy garments that had covered her body.

He knelt and prayed and raised stiff arms towards the tower. And when the sun had lifted his whole splendour above the hills, Joan lowered her eyes and gazed at the man kneeling in the snow. Flashes of light were on his helmet, and the scabbard of his sword. She looked at him for a moment, and then descended into her cell.

Pelleas stared for a long while at the trampled

snow. Even through the calm that had fallen on him he seemed to hear the faint sound of voices afar off. The voices were wild, woodland voices, and not the serene chanting of a choir.

Presently Pelleas arose, and his knees were stiffer than the rusty hinges of a dungeon door. Cramp took him in the muscles of his legs, yet when the flesh complained the spirit exulted. Across the white glare of the snow he saw great wains laden with faggots crawling towards the southern gate. The gate stood open, and under the arch a little old man who sold hot drinks had set up his table and his brazier full of sea-coal. Rows of brown ale-horns were laid out on the table, and the old fellow was bending over the brazier and stirring the drink in the great bowl.

Pelleas's body cried out for warmth, and for the once he humoured the flesh and did not deny it so innocent a desire.

The ale-seller was a shrunken old fellow with unwashed eyes, a nose covered with a network of red veins, and hands whose fingers ended in yellow claws. He looked inquisitively at Pelleas as he took the leaden ladle with which he ladled the hot drink into the horns.

"Hard weather, lording," he said; "but, dear Lord, nothing to what it was when I was a boy."

Pelleas took the horn from him.

"I can call to mind a winter, lording, when I had icicles a span long on my chin. It froze so quickly

in some parts that the ducks were frozen into the water. And I can assure ye there were snow-drifts half as high as the city wall."

The old man was a cheerful liar, and the hot drink warmed Pelleas's patience.

"Maybe you have seen our new recluse, lording, she who kneels all night on a wooden tower?"

"By St. Wilfrid's Church, gaffer?"

The ale-seller made a clucking sound with his tongue.

"Poor wench, she will not last the winter. Some day they will find her stiff as a frozen sheep. And they say she is wondrous comely!"

Pelleas stared at the wrinkled, bleary-eyed face. The old fellow with his ladle and his hot drink appeared to keep a comfortable hold on life. A great wain loaded with faggots came lumbering up, the carter blowing out blue cheeks, and looking lovingly towards the brazier. Pelleas put down his horn and a piece of money, and went on into Roymers.

At a baker's he bought half a loaf of bread, and put it under his surcoat.

"Seed-sowing and harvest," he thought, "and bread for a man's body. It is true that we all crumble. But in youth—! To die before one is ripe for the scythe!"

The ale-seller's words set up a clamour in his ears, and he stood still like a man at whom people shout contradictory orders. A beggar bearing a sack jostled him as he passed. Two young city dames

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brushed by, laughing in his grave, grim, meditative face. Pelleas had seen the figure of Death. But Death did not threaten the old ale-seller by the gate. The grey hand was stretched out to drag Joan from her wooden tower.

Amazement seized him. He desired to be alone with this wanton and incredible truth. Under the shadow of a church-tower he saw a gateway that led into a walled burial-ground. Black yews grew among the snow-covered graves, and the place was deserted and silent in the midst of the life of Roymer.

Within the gate stood a stone pillar about five feet high, and on top of the pillar had been fastened a skull. Snow had drifted into the eye-sockets and given them a white and arrogant stare. Pelleas stood and looked at the skull.

He saw Latin words carved on the pillar.

"Beauty is but flesh, skin, and hair. Behold what lieth under thine own face."

A yew-tree grew on the other side of the gateway, and Pelleas leant against the trunk and pondered. He stared at the skull, and the skull, with its eyes of snow, stared back at him. The thing had an evil, shrewd, and confident grin. It was so well assured of the ultimate issue that it stared life in the face and sneered.

As Pelleas looked at the skull, it began to talk to him through his own thoughts.

"See what is written on the pillar," it said; "all carnal beauty is nothing but ordure and bones."

Pelleas made answer.

"God made the frame, and God covered it. Therefore, beauty in the flesh is given of God."

The skull chuckled.

"Come hither and kiss me," it said, "for—once—lips were here. Red lips are to be desired. In a year the mouth of the woman will be bare bone, and bleached teeth."

Pelleas grew angry. He held his head high and showed a proud throat.

"Miserable clay, your end is dust. But the spirit——"

The skull stared at him and sneered.

"The spirit is clad in beautiful clay. Can a man clasp the spirit? And the woman is young. The blood is red in her body. Yet she will have no other lover than Death! I laugh at the foolishness of it."

The skull's eyes were white, Pelleas's full of passionate fire.

"Corruption cannot touch a saint," he said.

"My friend, hear what Death says. The worms come to the feast. And out of the red mouth that you desired shall crawl noisome things."

Pelleas made a stride, and held up a clenched fist.

"Silence, blasphemer!"

The skull seemed to laugh.

"When she whom you love has been dead a month, look upon her body. Such a little while, and yet——"

Pelleas's fist descended. He smote the skull into

fragments, and passed on to a place where the sun was shining. Here, he sat himself on a low stone wall, and fell a-brooding, nor could he escape the thoughts that the skull had suggested. His own body, crushed by austerities, rose in revolt, and cried out in anger against the insolent ugliness of death. It was unthinkable that corruption should touch that which was so full of youth and of beauty. Joan was not ripe for death. The wrinkled bodies of hags and of old women were the food for worms to feed upon.

These thoughts tormented him, and he left the burial-ground and wandered through the city, pausing to pray before all the shrines, and even kissing the forehead of a hideous old beggar-woman who sat by the western door of St. Jude's Church.

"I will not look either for beauty or ugliness in the flesh," he said.

And straightway he found himself imagining his lips touching Joan's forehead.

He smote himself on the mouth.

"Before nightfall I will go and stand before her cell," he thought, "and she shall show me that her soul no longer breathes the breath of this baser earth."

Dusk was falling when Pelleas climbed the steps that led to the city wall near St. Wilfrid's Church and saw Joan's tower rising against the sunset. The platform was empty, and before the window of the cell knelt a little girl with a crooked back. The

cripple rose to go as Pelleas approached. He took her place before the window, crossed himself, and tried to pray.

But his prayers drifted towards the window of Joan's cell rather than towards heaven. His heart cried out and would not be silenced.

He covered his face with his arms.

"Beloved of God, I have come to drink of your sanctity, and to be strengthened."

Pelleas heard a faint sound within the cell, like the rustling of dead leaves in a wind.

"Who is it that speaks to me?"

"I, Pelleas, who carried you out of Birchhanger."

Her silence fell like a scourge upon his shoulders, and he bore it as he had borne other austerities for the chastening of his soul. For the moment he believed that she was loth to speak with him, because he brought her memories that carried the scent of the earth. He did not guess that his voice had thrilled her and made her tremble.

"Pelleas——"

He raised his head, with a brightening of the eyes.

"Beloved of God——"

"How is life with you?"

"Then I may speak—? It will be to my good comfort; nor shall I vex you with worldly words."

"Say what you will."

So Pelleas told her how he had sought to trample all earthly desires under his feet; how he had starved and beaten his body, and sought God in the wilder-

ness. Also he told her how it had seemed good to God to make him a captain over the outlawed and the poor, to defend them against violence and the evil creatures of the King.

Joan listened in silence. She was kneeling on the stone floor with a wooden cross in her hands.

"My brother," she said when he had finished, "you have chosen the rough road. As for me, I have found rest."

A look of great intentness came into Pelleas's eyes.

"Tell me, are you at peace?"

With strange passion she kissed the wooden cross.

"It is more than peace. Each day the needs of my body grow less and less; even the cold is welcome, for it seems to strip my soul of the warm clay. In my dreams I have seen Heaven and all the Saints. Each morning I lift my eyes to the dawn, and the earth grows like a little cloud under my feet."

For a while Pelleas said nothing. He stared at the rough stones in the cell wall, and his face was troubled.

"It is difficult to die to life," he said.

Joan answered him:

"To me life was very cruel. I change a rough garment for a soft robe of light."

"But death? Death can be insolent and ugly. It is difficult for us to suffer death to corrupt those whom we love."

"Death has power alone over the body."

Pelleas bowed his head. He could not forget

that Joan was very beautiful, and he grudged her to Death's corrupt and familiar hands.

"They say in Roymer that you are slaying your body," he said.

"Yet, here, in the wind and rain, I have found joy and peace."

Dusk had faded into darkness, and the stars were in the sky. The Roymer bells were silent, and the city white and still, with its folk huddled before their fires. But Pelleas, the fanatic, clung to the city wall.

"Beloved of God," he said, "suffer me to watch here through the night. The peace that passeth understanding may come to me from your cell."

Joan answered him.

"I will pray that my peace may be your peace, my joy, your joy."

So Pelleas knelt beneath the window of Joan's cell. And for the moment he was comforted by the very helplessness of all earthly love. Joan had become a spirit. In spirit alone could she be his. Therefore Pelleas humbled himself, and kissed the stones in the wall of her cell.

XLI

The Sacking of Roymer

It was on the evening of St. Thomas's day that Savaric de Mallein and the King's people surprised and took the rich city of Roymer. It ever remained a marvel how the Poitevins contrived to come within galloping distance of the walls without a word of warning reaching the city. As for the actual taking of the place, it seems to have been made easy by treachery, for the King's folk came galloping over the snow by starlight, to find the eastern gate of Roymer open. They rode straight into the city, with horns and trumpets blowing, struck down such as blundered out to resist them, and lighting a thousand torches, they gathered in the market place; left their horses there under a strong guard, and went forth to rapine and to plunder.

Pelleas was asleep at his inn, and woke to the thunder of horsemen pouring up the street. He tumbled up, armed himself, and went out into the inn-yard where a number of frightened folk were huddled together like sheep in a pen. Pelleas pushed his way through, and made the inn-keeper open the gate. It was banged to behind him, nor had he gone twenty steps when a knot of torches came down the

street. Pelleas, drawing back into a dark entry, saw spears, shields, and a blurr of colours about a woman mounted on a white horse.

It was Isabeau of the Red Tower and her people, and—since Isabeau was in Roymer—Pelleas guessed what had befallen the city. The spears, shields, and torches came crowding along the street, and stopped close to the dark entry where Pelleas stood.

Isabeau was armed like a knight. Her red hair flowed from under a helmet, and she carried a light spear with a red pennon at its throat. When she spoke her men were silent and listened as to the voice of a great captain.

“There is that little witch Joan of Birchhanger,” she said, “who has set herself up for a saint in Roymer. Find out the nearest way to this wooden tower of hers.”

The men laughed and began to hammer at the doors of the neighbouring houses.

“A guide,” they shouted, “a guide to the saint’s tower. Our Lady would go and worship.”

It was the raucous shouts of Isabeau’s men that made Pelleas realise what he desired most in the whole world. The whole scheme of his austerities fell like a house before a whirlwind. His grim yet hollow piety was forgotten. He found himself in the main street, pushing his way through the crowd of soldiers, and not troubling to be gentle in forcing himself a path.

Some cursed, and Pelleas cursed them back.

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"May the rats gnaw your heels in hell!"

"Who is the fellow?"

"Hi! Gilbert, buffet the fool on the jaw for my sake!"

A drunken Poitevin struck at Pelleas with the pommel of his sword. Pelleas thrust him aside into the gutter, and went on. It was lucky for him that none of the men recognised him as Pelleas the Just.

He broke through, turned into a side alley, and started to run. The way had become as familiar to him as a path to a ploughboy who treads it night and morning, and Pelleas ran like a man with one desire, holding his scabbard with one hand, and using the other to thrust aside such folk as loitered in his way. He knew that he could reach the wall by St. Wilfrid's Church before Isabeau and her men. He would snatch Joan away and carry her out of Roymer.

The streets and alleys about St. Wilfrid's Church were deserted, and Pelleas saw the great southern gate hanging open as he turned across to one of the flights of steps leading to the battlements. The white roofs of Roymer glistened in the starlight, and rising towards the pole-star Pelleas beheld Joan's wooden tower, and Joan herself, a dim figure kneeling high above the walls of Roymer.

There was no way of entering the cell, for the doorway had been walled up, and the window was too narrow for a man to pass through it. The wooden tower was a mere open framework, and it would be

possible for Joan to drop from the lowest stage and let him catch her in his arms.

He called to her.

"Joan, beloved of God, our enemies are in Roymer."

He saw her turn on her knees, and look at him over the edge of the platform. Her white face seemed set among the stars.

"Who calls me?"

"I—Pelleas. Isabeau and her men are seeking for you. Come down—and drop into my arms. I will carry you out of the city."

A red glow began to spread over the northern quarters of the city, the light of the burning houses wantonly fired by Savaric's men. Roymer was like the accursed pit. Terrible sounds rose from it, the trampling and neighing of war-horses, the shouts of the pillagers, the roar of the flames, the cries of women and children.

Pelleas could no longer see Joan's face. He thought for the moment that she had left the platform and was descending the tower, but he saw no movement upon the winding stair. Only when he drew back some steps along the wall did he discover that Joan was still upon the platform of the tower.

She was standing and looking out over Roymer where the flames played above the snow-covered roofs. It was as though she were absorbed in watching the burning city, and had forgotten that such a thing as Pelleas existed.

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He called to her with vehemence, hollowing his hands about his mouth.

"Joan—Joan——"

Her figure remained motionless.

"It is the Devil tempting me."

She spoke loud enough for Pelleas to hear her, and he flung the words back at her with fierce impatience.

"It is I—Pelleas—and no devil. Dame Isabeau is the devil who will drag you down from heaven."

She paid no heed, and continued to stand gazing over Roymer. Had Pelleas been able to look into her face, he would have seen the exultation of madness in her eyes. Cold, hunger, and ecstasy had taken away her reason. She looked down and saw Roymer burning, and the flames at her feet were part of her frenzy.

Pelleas gave a cry of dread and of desire.

"Joan, save yourself!"

He saw her stretch out her arms, and heard her say:

"Lord, thou hast bidden me throw myself from this tower. Though the Devil tempts me, I have no fear. Angels shall bear me up, and away from the hands of wicked men."

Pelleas stood dumb. He understood of a sudden that Joan was as one possessed. Floating upon ecstasy she faltered upon the edge of a precipice. The thought smothered him with a sense of horrible helplessness. He threw out his arms, and struggled like a man in a wild sea.

"God has not said it! It is the Devil, the voice of the Devil!"

Suddenly he saw the burial-ground of St. Wilfrid's Church fill with torches, and heard men shouting.

Pelleas laid a hand on his sword. From the torches he looked towards Joan. She had turned from Roymer, and was standing upon the very edge of the platform, on the side towards the moat.

Pelleas held his breath. A flash of intuition struck across the darkness of his dread. He turned, went leaping down the steps, and ran for the southern gate. Passing through, with no one to gainsay him, he crossed the bridge and ran along the edge of the broad moat, his eyes fixed on the tower and on the figure that showed against the stars.

He stopped with a strange cry, and his heart stood still within him. Joan had given herself to the angels of her visions, and he saw her—falling—falling.

XLII

Over the Snow

LUCKILY for Pelleas the bank of the moat was not too steep, or he and Joan would have been drowned together. He struggled out, drawing Joan after him, and lay panting beside her on the trampled snow. His sword and hauberk had cumbered him in the water, and even his great strength had been taxed to the uttermost. As for Joan, she neither moved nor uttered a sound. The rough brown tunic that had served her all the winter had torn treacherously when Pelleas had gripped it, and she lay with bare shoulders touching the snow.

Pelleas saw the glare of torches, and heard Isabeau's men shouting on the city wall. From their shouts he knew that they had not seen Joan's fall from the tower.

"The door is walled up," cried one.

"Bring a ladder. We can pull the wench through the tiles."

Pelleas rose on his hands and knees, overshadowing Joan like a wild beast guarding its mate. Whether she was alive or dead Pelleas could not tell; but, alive or dead, she was his, and no one should take her from him.

He laid an ear against her bosom, and heard the beating of her heart. Her breath fluttered under him, sending a surge of exultation through his blood. He must carry Joan away before Isabeau's men found that the cell was empty, and looked further afield. But whither should he carry her? His horse was in Roymer, but Roymer was too perilous, and from the walls a white wilderness stretched towards the Wold. His cheek touched Joan's shoulder, and its coldness frightened him. The deep water in the moat had saved her, but she would die unless he found her warmth, food, and clothing. His own surcoat was wet and muddy, or he would have wrapped it about her body. Nor did he dare to venture into Roymer, and leave Joan lying in the snow.

He gathered her in his arms, trying to wrap the brown tunic about her body, but the stuff was frail and rotten, and ran into rents that let the white skin show through. His own body in its sodden clothes cried out for the warmth of a blazing fire. And suddenly he remembered the shepherd's cottage on the hills, not three miles from the southern gate of Roymer. He threw one glance behind him at Joan's tower, and started away across the snow.

Pelleas was as a man carrying a sacred lamp whose flame was sustained by the last few drops of precious oil. It was a race for the replenishment of Joan's life, and from a striding walk Pelleas broke into a run. He held Joan close to him with her head upon his shoulder, and as his own body grew warm with

running he felt more keenly how cold she was. White and inert, with limp hands and feet, she seemed to sleep the tragic sleep of one numbed by the snow. Pelleas asked himself whether she would ever open her eyes again, and he could not answer his own question. The deep water in the moat had broken her fall from the tower, but the fall had stunned her, and he had found her unconscious when he had come to her in the moat.

Pelleas ran till the sweat streamed from him and his breath came in great gasps. Roymer became a black mound, flame-set across the snow. A trampled track marked the way for him, but he met no one, either in the bleak, bare orchards or upon the pastures of the hills. From running he dropped to a walk, and then broke again into a stubborn trot. Joan seemed to grow colder and colder, and as he carried her, Pelleas felt a great chill at his heart.

At the brow of a hill he stopped to get his breath. A sudden impulse made him press his lips to Joan's. Her cold, lifeless mouth filled him with a kind of frenzy, and he ran on again over the snow, exulting even in the passion of suspense. He remembered the moonlight amid the bracken and the warm smell of a summer night, and he began to talk as he ran, uttering short, breathless sentences, almost as a mother talks to a child. The broad bowl of heaven blazed with stars. They were very cold, those stars. Everything seemed lamentably cold, save his own hot, panting body.

The hills rose under his feet. He began to stagger, to roll from side to side, and to kick the snow up clumsily as he ran. A knot of pain twisted itself under his ribs. He cursed it, and looked for a light over the waste of snow.

For a moment he glanced back at Roymer, and saw it a black casket set with rubies. Then he stumbled over something in the track, and fell, with Joan under him. His mouth touched her body. A strange delight rushed through him, mingling with the anger of a man mad with haste. He picked himself up, and saw that he had fallen over the body of a dead sheep. The snow was discoloured about the carcass, and from the body protruded the shaft of a broken spear.

He gathered Joan in his arms, and, breasting a piece of rising ground, came suddenly upon a light. It was the glow of a fire outlined by the black lintel and side posts of a doorway. From the lay of the land Pelleas knew it to be the shepherd's cottage, though he missed the sour smell of sheep penned within hurdles, and the silence was the silence of wild moorland under the stars. The place had an eerie sense of emptiness despite the light of the fire. Pelleas remembered the dead sheep in the snow, and wondered whether some of Savaric's Poitevins had ridden that way.

Pelleas did not suffer his imagination to play with possibilities. He crossed a stretch of mud and trampled snow, pushed through a gate in a wattle fence, and paused on the threshold of the cottage.

The place was empty, and yet betrayed no signs of disorder. The door of a rough cupboard stood open, and showed bread, bacon, a jar and a drinking-horn, bundles of dried herbs, a pot of honey, and a pile of apples. In one corner were stacked several trusses of hay, and a coarse woollen cloak had been spread on them as though to dry. The fire on the round hearth had burnt itself to a heap of red and grey ash, upon which smoked sundry tough old thorn stubs, black and charred.

Pelleas forgot the struggle through the snow, for the sight of the fire rekindled the hope in him. He carried Joan into the cottage, and laid her upon one of the trusses of hay. Piled against the cottage were a number of faggots, and Pelleas brought four of them in before closing and barring the door. He cut the faggot-withies with his sword, stirred the ashes, and threw on light wood till the flames leapt towards the rough louvre in the roof. Pelleas did not trouble his head about the shepherd. The good man's cloak offered itself, and Pelleas took the heavy woollen stuff, and held it before the fire until it was hot to the touch. Joan lay white and motionless upon the hay, and Pelleas looked at her with something akin to awe.

Life and love had to be served. He bent over her, and tore off the rotten tunic. Next, he took a truss of hay, broke the bands, and spread it near the fire. Upon the hay Pelleas spread the shepherd's cloak, and taking Joan in his arms he laid her upon the

bed that he had made. The fire blazed up with sudden vehemence, gleaming upon the black disorder of her hair, and making her body shine like ivory.

Pelleas threw off his wet surcoat and his hauberk, and kneeling amid the hay he wrapped the woollen cloak about her, and began to chafe Joan's feet and hands. They were very cold, cold as the snow, for the blood had withdrawn from them into her heart. From time to time he threw on more wood, till the heat of the fire made his wet tunic steam, and threatened to set light to the loose hay. Yet though he held Joan so that the warmth of the fire blazed upon her bosom, no blush of colour crept back into her skin. She lay white and inert, with closed eyes and upturned hands.

Pelleas's bronzed face and throat were the colour of brown wood, and his eyes the eyes of a man staking his all on one throw of the dice. He laid Joan on the hay, and knelt, watching her with hungry intentness. Sometimes he glanced restlessly, even fiercely, into the dark corners of the cottage. The figure of Death seemed to lurk there, waiting for the end to come.

Presently he touched her hands. They were cold as stone, though the firelight shone on them. Pelleas uttered a deep cry, and fell to passionate praying.

Yet, in the very midst of his praying, he was stricken mute by the thought of that for which he prayed. He imagined scorn and wrath in Heaven, and the cold faces of the Saints. He—a man, and a

false monk—was striving for the soul of a woman who was a saint. He was trying to hold her back upon earth, to clasp her in his arms, to rob Paradise of her presence.

Pelleas knelt with bowed head, speechless. A sharp spasm of anger went through him. He looked at Joan, and it seemed damnable that she should die, and be snatched away into God's presence. Had he not a man's right to desire her, to worship her with his soul, and body? Why should he suffer her to die! He would thrust God, Death, and the Devil out through the doorway of the shepherd's cottage.

He caught her fiercely, and held her close to him, his mouth to her mouth, his heart to hers. One hand was under her head, the other arm about her body. Pelleas breathed upon her mouth, and all his manhood yearned upon her lips.

He called her by name.

"Joan—Joan—my desire, my heart!"

The fragrant scent of the hay floated about them. Pelleas felt his heart clamouring to hers. He held her close and let the warmth of his body flow into Joan's. His face was full of hunger and defiance.

"You shall live," he said; "you shall live. Even God and his angels shall not take you from me."

He reached out, and threw more wood upon the fire. And with the upward crackle of the flames a faint colour crept slowly into Joan's cheeks. Pelleas watched it, as a man cured of blindness might watch the coming of the dawn.

Presently Joan gave a great sigh. Her lips opened, and there was a quivering of her lashes. Very gently Pelleas laid her upon the hay. He knelt, watching a miracle, the return of life to the body of the woman he loved.

XLIII

Amid the Hay

JOAN looked up into Pelleas's face, and her eyes were full of a dim languor. She seemed to question nothing, to be amazed at nothing. Her body, starved and exposed to wind and rain, drank in the warmth of the fire, and nestled into the softness of the hay. It was the awakening of some sweet woodland figure, a figure with gazelle's eyes, and black, mysterious hair. The hag-saint had died in that moment of frenzy upon the tower at Roymer. With this sweet, sensuous awakening, Joan seemed to shed the last months of her life and to become once more the earthly woman.

Pelleas forgot all else in watching her. There was no madness in her eyes, no pitiful distempered piety. The shadows that cold and hunger had laid upon her face had melted and disappeared. A yawn came—slowly. She opened her arms wide, and spread them so that the woollen cloak slipped aside and suffered the firelight to play upon her bosom.

Suddenly she uttered a sharp cry. Her right hand had touched one of the stones set in a circle round the hearth, and the moment's pain flashed familiarly upon her consciousness. She started up, leaning on

one arm, and drawing the cloak about her. The pupils of her eyes were dark and troubled circles; the languor had gone from her limbs.

Memories were coming back to her. Pelleas could almost see them as shadows passing across her face.

"Pelleas!"

She shrank from him a little, though not with fear. That start of pain had opened all the wounds of her old world. She seemed to drop back into those evil depths of spiritual anguish and unrest, and her hands groped amid the hay.

"Where am I?"

Pelleas was kneeling with his great brown fists clenched upon his knees.

"Not very long ago," he said, "you were in the moat at Roymer."

Her eyes fled round the room, and came back to Pelleas's face.

"In the water? It was all dark—and I remember the cold rush of the wind."

She shuddered, drew the cloak more closely about her, and looked gratefully at the fire. A wind had risen, and they heard it crying hoarsely amid the great oaks of the Wold. There were moanings about the roof of the cottage, but the warmth within and the scent of the hay were like the breath of June.

Pelleas went to the shepherd's cupboard. He brought out bread, a pot of honey, and a jar of mead.

"To live, it is necessary that one should eat," he said; "and you are going to eat and to live."

His voice set the chords of Joan's heart vibrating. There was love in the sound, defiance, and tenderness. And she remembered the wooden tower the good Sisters had built for her, her austerities, and her visions.

Joan's hands moved restlessly amid the hay. Pelleas's presence was the old passionate presence of love. She felt it in every fibre, and in the air, as the strange thrilling of a voice that sang.

"Have I not forbidden myself to cherish my body?"

Pelleas pushed aside some of the hay, and set the food close to her.

"I have learnt many things to-night," he said.

"We fools abuse our bodies and heap curses on them, because they may have brought us into sorrow or pain. But I have come to love my body and to honour it, because it was given me of God."

She answered him:

"The Devil is Lord of the flesh."

Pelleas cut a slice from the loaf, spread honey upon it, and held it towards her.

"I will not hold that doctrine," he said. "Take this and eat. There need be no dishonour in feeding the flesh."

Their eyes met, as over the taking of some solemn sacramental oath.

Then Pelleas said:

"Those who abuse and wound the body are fools, for it is in our bodies that we love and live and have our being. Who would starve his dog, or break the

poor beast's bones, or lop the limbs from a goodly fruit tree? I tell you, I have seen many men miserable because of their souls. If it is a sin to love and to be hungry, then God sins in each one of His creatures."

Their eyes met, asking and answering many questions. Then Joan stretched out a hand and took the bread and honey. Pelleas threw more wood upon the fire, and in the up-leap of the flames there was a note of triumph.

Pelleas broke bread for himself and ate. For a while they were silent, avoiding each other's eyes.

The wind swept, moaning, over the cottage, and far away they heard the plaintive bleating of a sheep.

Pelleas said:

"A healthy body is like this cottage. It keeps out the winter wind. Moreover, I will swear from henceforth that it is good to serve God with a warm body, and a heart that is full."

They drank mead out of the same jar. Joan sighed and looked at the fire. Her mouth had softened, and her eyes were full of tremors of light.

"How sweet the hay is. It smells like a mown field in summer."

Pelleas glanced at her, and said nothing. He rose, and lifting another truss from the corner, he broke the bands, and spread the hay about Joan so that it should support her head and shoulders.

She lay back with a great sigh, and with drooping lashes. Suddenly she opened her eyes, and smiled at Pelleas.

"What of the fire?" she asked him.

"If I let it die down you will be cold."

Their eyes met.

"Cover me with hay," she said, "and I shall be warm."

He took another truss, and scattered it over her. She bathed her arms and hands in the fragrant stuff.

"I smell a smell of June," she said; "Pelleas, Pelleas, have I been dead—and am I alive again?"

XLIV

The Cradle

No sun was shining when Pelleas and Joan set out from the shepherd's cottage. A grey sky went hurrying over the Wold, and the wind fled drearily through the trees. Now that the day had come Pelleas saw that the snow about the cottage had been trampled by many horses, and that the hurdles where the sheep had been penned were broken and overturned. He understood why he had found the place deserted. Some of Savaric's men had ridden that way, and swept sheep and shepherd away over the snow.

Pelleas showed a brown and unabashed face to the wind, but Joan's head drooped, and her lips were silent. Pelleas had found her an old homespun tunic in the shepherd's cupboard, and he had swathed her feet and ankles in bands that he had cut from the skin of a sheep. She wore the shepherd's grey woollen cloak bound with strips torn from Pelleas's green surcoat. Her hair blew with the wind that came sweeping over the Wold.

Where the gaunt oak woods lifted terrified arms towards the sky Joan seemed to drift like a frail snowflake into the winter of the wilderness. Her

love was a shame-faced love, and she would not meet Pelleas's eyes, though that son of Adam went sturdily and held his head erect before God. The woman's heart was troubled and dismayed. Something akin to fear had fallen on her, and she glanced back with alarmed eyes at the vows and the austerities of yesterday. Had she not suffered herself to be caught and whirled away in the midst of a rhapsody and to be held in the strong arms of an earthly love? Joan had awakened that morning to a grey light and the winter's cold. When Pelleas had touched her hand she had drawn it away, and turned a brooding face to the ashes of the fire.

Pelleas glanced at her often as they trudged side by side over the snow. He understood in a measure what was passing in Joan's heart, for had not he himself trampled on the face of his old fanaticism? Yet being wise and full of valour, he did not pester her with arguments and play the sympathetic and talkative fool. A man, strong in his silence, he moved beside her as a protecting presence, looking at life squarely with shrewd and determined eyes.

Pelleas had dreamed a dream as he lay on the hay in the shepherd's cottage. He dreamt that he saw the Lord Christ walking in the streets of Roymer, and the light of His face was like the light of the sun striking through April clouds. All the nuns and the monks had come out solemnly from their houses to follow Him, chanting exultantly through their noses, and puffing themselves up when they passed.

the houses of sin. It had seemed to Pelleas that the Lord Jesus was not glad of the crowding of these dolorous people upon His heels. In the great market place of Roymer, girls, young men, and children were dancing to the music of a lute and a viol played by two women in garments of purple and green. And in his dream Pelleas saw the Christ take the viol from the woman's hands and play strange, joyous melodies for the young men, the maidens, and the children to dance to. Whereat the holy folk had stood astounded, and pulled long and blessed faces. They had begun to whisper that it was not the Christ, but the Devil who had taken the likeness of God. The Lord Jesus, reading their hearts, had turned to them and said:

"Get you away into the ale-houses and the brothels. For the pride and insolence of the pious are the gall in the cup of Life."

Pelleas's spirit was the spirit of his dream, but Joan, cast down and ashamed, dragged her feet through the snow and brooded. Under the gaunt boughs of the forest trees she felt that Pelleas's strength overshadowed her, and that his patient and steadfast silence moved onward without fear. He did not hesitate, nor were his eyes ashamed, while her own soul felt blown hither and thither like a wounded bird in a storm. Ever and again she was seized by an overwhelming impulse that urged her to throw herself into his arms, to forget everything, to let him carry her and her distress. In another

instant a cold hand would strike her across the bosom and thrust her away from him, and she felt that she could lie down and die in the snow.

Some two leagues from Roymer they came to a stream running through a desolate valley where furze-bushes and stunted birch-trees waved in the wind. The stream ran with turgid haste, washing the ledges of the overhanging banks, and carrying dead wood and leaves upon its surface. Pelleas broke a young birch-tree, and probed the stream with the tree bole. He smiled when he found how shallow was the stream's bluster, and that the water would hardly reach to his knees.

"I can carry you over in my arms."

Joan had sunk down under a furze-bush, and her hands hung over her knees.

"I will go no further with you."

He looked at her intently.

"Then you would die in the snow?"

She hung her head, and her eyes were heavy.

"At Roymer, you would not suffer me to die, but dragged me back to the warm and deceitful earth."

Pelleas threw the birch-tree aside, walked slowly towards her, and stood still.

"I shall not let you die. I have sworn that in my heart."

He caught her up, and sprang down into the stream. For the moment Joan clung to him, and then began to struggle in his arms.

"Pelleas, put me down!"

He forded the stream, a smile on his mouth, the water swirling about his legs.

"If you will not walk, I shall carry you. So do not waste your strength."

She ceased to resist, and lay in his arms with sullen resignation. Neither of them uttered a word as Pelleas trudged on over the snow. He could feel Joan's heart beating like the heart of a frightened bird. But her eyes were obscure, and full of bleak distances.

Presently she said to him, tonelessly:

"Set me down. I can walk."

He put her down, and she gathered her cloak round her and went on in silence.

Sometimes they stopped to rest and eat, for Pelleas had brought food from the shepherd's cottage. It was he who decided where they should bide, and when they should rest, Joan saying nothing, and betraying neither pain nor pleasure. Her eyes avoided his, and remained fixed upon the horizon, even while she broke bread and ate. Her face seemed empty of all emotion, nor did she confess to the weariness that weighed her down like a cape of lead.

About noon Pelleas saw a thread of smoke rising above the black boughs of an oak wood. He bore towards it, and they were soon moving among the trees. Pelleas's eyes grew keen and vigilant, and he held his head high like a wild beast on the alert.

They had come to the edge of the wood when Pelleas laid a hand on Joan's arm and held her back.

The white ground sloped away from the oak-trees, and set in the snow they saw what appeared to be a great black heap. A column of smoke rose from its summit, like smoke from the cone of a volcano.

All about this black mound the snow had thawed, and the ground been trampled into brown mud. A little way to the west stood a half-burnt stack of hay, and near it, a thing that looked like an overturned box lay under the shelter of a few green faggots. Three crows were circling, perching, and flapping about the faggots as though they had found plunder there, but were not bold enough to seize it. A flock of sparrows, finches, blackbirds, and thrushes were gathered on the brown soil about the black mound.

Pelleas glanced right and left and then swept Joan along with him in the hollow of his arm. The smaller birds rose and fled with a great whirl of wings. The three crows uttered hoarse cries, and rose clumsily, their black shapes trailing over the snow.

"Savaric's men have been here."

Joan spoke for the first time since they had forded the stream.

"The fire?"

"It was a cottage, or farm-house, yesterday."

Pelleas's eyes were on the dark thing that lay near the faggots. It looked like a hutch turned on its side, and with its lid torn off. Something white showed within it.

In one place the snow was stained with dark-

red splashes. Pelleas drew Joan to one side. They stopped abruptly and stood with bodies touching, staring at the thing that lay by the faggots. It was an overturned cradle. The bedding had slipped down, and half-smothered in it lay a young child.

Pelleas's arm tightened about Joan's body. He felt her lean her weight upon him, while her eyes remained fixed on the child.

"Is it dead?"

They bent over the cradle, and saw the round, pink face, the fair hair, the movement of the clothes as the child breathed. Joan's lips quivered, but no sound came from them. Pelleas's brown hands went into the cradle.

There was an opening of blue eyes, a gulp, a stretching forth of diminutive fists. Then a red mouth opened and set up a valiant howl.

Pelleas held the youngster clumsily, much as a child holds a cat by the middle. He looked abashed. Joan's hands rushed out to rob him.

"Oh, how you are holding it. Give him to me."

Pelleas watched Joan and the child, and the light in his eyes was very wonderful.

XLV

Tears

THE child seemed a miraculous child, for Joan had not held him in her arms for three minutes before they heard the sound of lowing and saw a black cow with swollen udder come trotting over the snow. The child lay and laughed in Joan's arms, kicking out his legs, and pulling her black hair with his fingers. And close by were the blood-stains on the snow and the pile of smoking ashes.

The black cow came as tamely as a dog to Pelleas. He led her by the horns to the half-burnt hay-stack, and tearing some of the charred stuff aside, he managed to pull out an armful of rather smoky fodder. The cow's hunger gave her a relish, and she munched patiently while Pelleas washed with snow the mead jar that he had brought in his wallet. Taking a faggot, he sat down and milked the cow, letting the milk pour into the mead jar, and resting his head against the beast's side.

When he had filled the jar, Pelleas carried it to Joan and made her drink the warm, creamy milk.

"The babe can wait," he said.

A smile came into Joan's eyes. Then she looked at the child.

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"I wonder how old he is?"

Pelleas could not give an opinion.

"He or she—it had better have some milk," he said.

"Poor little heart, all alone in the snow! How are we to give it the milk? Have you a spoon in your wallet?"

"No, nor a cup."

Here was a complex riddle! The mead jar was too broad-lipped, and had no snout. Pelleas and Joan were baffled. They looked into each other's eyes with immense seriousness.

"If only we had a cup."

Pelleas was blessed with an inspiration.

"If I were to pour some milk into the palm of your hand——"

Joan's eyes flashed to his.

"Yes; see, I can pucker it up, and make a hollow. Be careful. Not too much."

The little pool of warm milk in Joan's palm put an end to the dilemma. The child took kindly to this primitive cup, while Pelleas stood by as the bearer of the jar.

In a little while they set off again across the snow, holding in the direction of Birchhanger, and followed by the black cow. The child had fallen asleep in Pelleas's arms, though Joan had been loth to surrender him. They walked close to each other, and very often Pelleas's arm lay about Joan's body, bearing her weight where the snow was deep.

Silence still sealed Joan's mouth. She would not speak, because, she said, of the sleeping child. But it was no longer the sullen silence of doubt and humiliation. Her face had lost its bleakness, and a soft, luminous light seemed to shine through the skin. Her eyes still looked into the distance, but they saw the pathos and the human sadness, and the sweet majesty of life instead of savage austerities, and the scolding faces of busy and meddlesome saints. Joan had been touched by the hand of Nature, perhaps without knowing that it was Nature's hand that had touched her.

That night they lodged in a hut that Pelleas built of fir boughs against a dry bank in the forest, caking the boughs with snow. The child lay in Joan's bosom, and Pelleas kept watch with his drawn sword across his knees. The little hut was warmed by the heat of their bodies, and the bank kept off the wind, Joan slept as soundly as the child, and woke on the morrow to the drinking of cow's milk and the breaking of bread.

Joan's face flushed and a dim mist covered her eyes when she first saw Birchhanger as a grey hill on the horizon. Pelleas's arm went round her, but neither of them had a word to say.

The first of the Birchhanger folk to see Pelleas and Joan was a boy, Widow Malda's son, who was gathering dead wood under the oaks in the valley. No sooner had the boy recognised them than he dropped his bundle of wood and ran towards Birch-

hanger as fast as the snow would suffer him. The house, tower, and barns were full of Pelleas's men and the woodland folk who had taken refuge there, among whom were many of Joan's own people. They set up a shouting when the boy brought the news, and went streaming down the hillside amid the birches where the dead bracken showed through the snow.

When Joan saw a crowd of men, women, and children hurrying across the valley she looked abashed and drew away from Pelleas's arm. Pelleas had the child slung in his surcoat, and the black cow still followed at their heels.

The people came to them with shouts of welcome, their rough, brown faces warm and honest. Many of the men fell on their knees before Pelleas, and called him "lord." The women, seeing the child sleeping in a fold of his surcoat, crowded round with soft looks and whispers. One old hag caught him by the knees, and kissed the scabbard of his sword.

"Lording," said she, "blessed be the day that brings ye back to us. God has given ye a brave heart, and pity for the poor, and eke the love of a fair lady."

There was much shouting and rough joy. Eyes were turned towards Joan who had gone red over the old hag's words. Some of her own folk had gathered round her and were kissing her hands, and touching her clothes, as though they were holy.

She stood for a moment with closed eyes, bosom heaving.

The men came carrying a war-saddle lashed to the staves of four spears. And they lifted Joan and carried her into Birchhanger, with the blowing of horns and the beating of shields.

Now in the great hall of Birchhanger, Joan, the great lady, the saint of the tower, gave way to a sudden rush of tears. The simple folk stared, whispered, and turned away their heads as though abashed at the sight of her weeping.

"It is because of her father," said some.

"She has suffered terribly," quoth others.

It was then that Pelleas took the child, and laid it in Joan's arms.

"Beloved," he whispered, "look upon the simple faces of these people. Here is the brown earth of life. Take heart——"

She held the child to her bosom, and lifted a face that shone through tears. A murmur went through the hall. The light from Joan's wet eyes seemed to shine on the faces of the people.

EPILOGUE

Now it befell one day that a woman wearing a green chaplet of bays, and carrying a viol in her hand, entered the city of Roymer by the northern gate, and passed through the streets until she reached the market-place. Roymer, that white town in a green valley, was a charred, blackened, bitter place, still haunted by the horrors of the winter night when the King's Poitevins and Dame Isabeau's people had broken in with fire and sword. Grass was sprouting between the stones in the streets. The loud, busy, and many-coloured life had changed to a sullen silence. Ashes and charred beams still littered the ground, though here and there workmen were putting up new houses. The folk who moved in the streets looked lean, and pinched, and starved. Their clothes were ragged, and eked out with sack-cloth and the skins of beasts, and their faces were thin and white.

The woman wearing the chaplet of bays climbed the steps of the market-cross, took her viol, and began to sing. A few people gathered round, and the words of her song seemed to puzzle them.

"The gluttonous beast is dead.
He will trample and tear no more.
Like a beast he lived, and like a beast he died.
Glory to God—and Our Lady."

The strange words of Mella, the singing woman, went through the blackened streets. More people gathered round the market-cross, grim, sullen, hungry folk, the remnant that sword, fire, winter, hunger, and sickness had spared. Roymer had been left lying torn and naked in the midst of the snow. Her folk had starved in the streets, and all her children might have perished had not a saint fallen from a tower and become a pitiful and living woman. Generations would tell the tale how Joan of the Tower and Pelleas the Just came out of the Great Wold bringing wain-loads of food and fuel, droves of hogs, and the skins of beasts for clothing. The people of Roymer had kissed Joan's feet and hands. She had saved them in those hours when they had had no heart or courage to save themselves from hunger and the cold.

So Mella stood by the market-cross and sang to the folk of Roymer of the death of the King. And for a while they listened and did not understand.

"It is Mella the singing woman," said one.

"What does she say?"

"Strange words. Some great beast is dead."

Mella looked at the starved faces and saw that they did not understand. She took the chaplet of bays from her head, and held it on high for silence.

"News—news!"

They crowded round.

"The King is dead, John is dead. Shout for God and Our Lady."

For a moment there was silence, the silence of people who were astonished, and slow to realise what had happened. Then a man leapt, and shouted. An old woman thrust skinny forearms into the air, and laughed like one gone mad. A slow, fierce, half-incredulous murmur swept over the crowd. Lean men looked questioningly into each other's eyes. The things that they had suffered had cast a numbness, a stupor upon them.

Then a man whose face had been burnt by falling timber and who had lost the sight of his eyes, screamed like a hawk:

"The King is dead—the King is dead—the King is dead."

The whole starved, grim crowd leapt to the cry. They were like dogs howling and baying; their teeth showed as white fangs. The market-place of Roymer became full of exultation and fierce frenzy.

A lull came, and a voice cried from somewhere like a voice out of a storm:

"Isabeau—Isabeau!"

Silence held for a moment, the silence of a crowd gripped by some sudden emotion. Their voices went up in a whirl of fury and execration. Men shouted in each other's faces:

"Isabeau—that red wolf——!"

"The King's woman—the King's dam."

"It was she who burnt our houses——"

"Isabeau!"

"Death—death!"

"She's at the Red Tower."

"Rend her in pieces."

"Isabeau—Isabeau."

"Pelleas of Birchhanger."

"He is our man."

The stupor of a long terror seemed lifted from the hearts of the people of Roymer. The King was dead. They howled their joy and their vengeance.

It was near dusk, and a wind blew through the birch trees on Birchhanger Hill, when a watchman on the tower saw a crowd of dark figures come out from the distant oak woods and hurry across the valley. He blew his horn, and in a little while the bell began to ring in the open belfry at the west end of the hall. The gate was shut and barred, and men ran to the squint holes in the walls. Pelleas and his comrades in arms took hauberk, shield, and sword, while Joan of the Tower went to hearten the women and children.

The sound of a multitude of hurrying feet came up the wooded slopes like the rustling of dead leaves in autumn. Men watched at the narrow squints with bows strung and arrows laid ready against the wall. Pelleas had climbed the tower. He stood armed upon the battlements, and the last gleams of the sun flashed upon his harness.

Scores of wild-faced men poured up from under the birches. They saw Pelleas upon the tower, and knowing him because he was bare-headed, brandished all manner of weapons, bills, pitch-forks,

scythes fastened to poles, axes, swords, and hammers—and they cried with loud, exultant voices:

“The King is dead—the King is dead. Vengeance on Isabeau! We are the men of Roymer.”

Pelleas held out his sword and shield to them, and they cheered him, and howled like wolves.

“Lording—come down and be our captain. We will follow none but you.”

So Pelleas descended to them, and his comrades in arms with him. In the main court Joan met him. She looked white and questioned him with her eyes.

“My desire—will you go with them?”

He answered her:

“Goliath is dead. The King is dead. Isabeau waits. It is the will of God.”

Mute, stealthy men had felled young trees in the woods about Dame Isabeau’s valley. They carried them, ten men to each trunk, to the edge of the Red Mere. The aspens chattered in alarm. It was a dark night in spite of the stars, and the men of Roymer were silent and grim. They lashed the trunks of the trees together in a great raft, and for poles they had the trunks of young ashes.

Pelleas sat his horse among the aspen trees, his men grouped in silence behind him. They were gazing at the black bulk of the tower that rose like black marble out of the inky water. Now and again the aspen trees shivered, and a man slipped

in the shallows and cursed under his breath. Dame Isabeau and her people were asleep, and not a light showed in the tower.

Pelleas felt something touch his knee. He turned sharply and saw someone standing beside his horse, and a dim face looking up into his.

"Lording, have you forgotten?"

Pelleas knew the voice.

"Mella——!"

"Mella, who threw your money into the road."

Pelleas bent down and looked into her face.

"Child, what do you here?"

"Child——!" and she laughed a little. "How old we have grown since we have come by a lady! Mella the singing woman has a boon to ask."

"Ask it."

He saw her lift something that glimmered very faintly. It was a naked sword.

"Lording, do you remember the sword you coveted in Roymer?"

Pelleas sat very straight in the saddle.

"I bought this sword for you the day you left me without a word. It is a good sword. Take it and use it to-night."

Pelleas stared at her in the darkness. His heart smote him, for suddenly he understood.

"Mella," he said, "sometimes it is good for a man to be put to shame."

"Shame!" she said. "What shame could I bring to you? Your proud eyes look above my head."

Pelleas was silent a moment. Then he said:
"Give me the sword."

And as she gave it him, he bent down and kissed her upon the forehead.

An owl's hoot broke the silence. There was the sound of splashing in the shallows, and the tramping of many feet. Pelleas rolled out of the saddle, and someone took the bridle of his horse. Shadowy figures came round him. Men whispered together, until a deep murmur filled the hollow dome of the night.

Mella stood alone among the aspen trees, watching and listening. She saw the mere break into vague, swirling movement. Poles splashed and water gurgled. The black surface before her might have been alive with great reptiles that swarmed in the dark water.

Then like a spark struck from flint and steel falling upon tinder, a red flare blazed out against the background of the night. A horn blared across the water, and the castle bell began to ring, jerkily, wildly, a bell in terror. Yellow gleams went over the fretted water, showing some vague, huge thing in motion, and the dark heads of men swimming. The shouts burst out like water roaring through an opened sluice. Axes and hammers battered at barred doors.

Mella shivered with the aspen leaves. Yonder, over the water, men were hunting men through dark passages and courts and stairways. Torches were

lit; narrow windows leapt to red and angry life. Mella could see men leaping from them, and hear the splash as their bodies struck the water.

Then, sharp and shrill, topping the uproar, came a long cry—the cry of a woman. It gathered, held a moment, and then broke like the cry of one who is smothered.

When the dawn came the Red Tower was a place of terror, and the men of Roymer slunk away like men whose lust was sated. A number of them followed Pelleas back to Birchhanger, footsore, hungry, but exultant. Pelleas had sent on a rider to tell Joan that all was well. He had had a search made for Mella the singing woman, but Mella was not to be found.

The men of Roymer who came to Birchhanger were shown a sweet and gracious sight. In the grass court where the falcons had their cages, Joan sat in an oak chair with a rag doll, a wooden sword, and a bunch of ribbons in her lap. About her on the grass played some twenty children, some of them brown-faced brats that crawled on all fours. They were the lost children of the Great Wold, orphans and starvelings whom Pelleas and Joan had gathered into Birchhanger. The peasants' child, whom they had found asleep in a cradle beside the charred posts of the cottage, sprawled and played with a puppy at Joan's feet.

The men of Roymer crowded the entry and looked in upon Joan of the Tower and the children playing

about her on the grass. A kind of awe fell upon them. Men who had done grim and terrible things in the rooms and passage-ways of the Red Tower, stood and stared with sheepish, smiling faces at these innocent children. It was like taking the blessed sacrament on a May morning, or touching the reliquary of some virgin saint.

Among the men stood Mella the singing woman, and there was a strange light in her eyes. Her mouth quivered like the mouth of one near to tears. She had tramped all the way to Birchhanger, following Pelleas and the men.

When the Roymer folk had gone, Pelleas, passing alone through the main court, saw a woman sitting on the horse-block near the doorway of the hall. It was Mella, and she had been weeping. She came and stood very humbly before him.

"Lording, Mother Mary has cleansed the heart in me. If I might but serve your Lady and the children——?"

Pelleas took Mella by the hand and led her to Joan his wife.

In the years that followed, the folk of the Great Wold talked of the life and deeds of Pelleas the Just, how he fought at Lincoln and was knighted there, and how he sailed with the ships of the Five Ports when Hubert worsted Eustace the Monk. How the clerks of the King's Court and the churchmen were vexed on his account by many subtle matters of law. How he was absolved of his vow-

breaking, and was given his father's lands by charter and dedicated three fair manors to the Abbot and monks of Roding.

In the Great Wold Pelleas was ever called Pelleas the Just, and his wife, Joan the Merciful. They lived to a good age, and were blessed with children. Their great love endured, filling their lives with honour, sweetness, and strength.

